THRILLING DETECTIVE

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

DEATH WEARS A MASK
A G-Men Novelet
By HENRY KUTTNER

MURDER CALLS THE TUNE
A Nevada Mystery Novelet
By W. T. BALLARD

A SHROUD FOR MR. HYDE
A Willie Brann Novelet
By BENTON BRADEN

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Simply send the coupon below, giving us your choice of colors. Your package sent immediately and you pay the postman only $1.00 each or all three articles are only $2.79 plus 20% Federal Tax and a few cents mailing cost on arrival. See how friends admire their sheer beauty and are mystified by their subtle perfume. When not in use, keep them with your dainty handkerchiefs as a sachet.

GIVEN

For Your Promptness. Purse size, Plastic case of exotic, solid PERFUME given for promptness if you order all 3.

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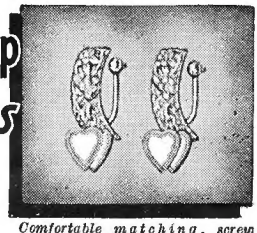
Meeting with popular demand in the shops from Fifth Avenue to Hollywood. Everyone agrees both the ring and earrings are the most perfect gifts and true emblems of love and friendship.



Comfortable matching, screw type Earrings are latest design.

Sterling Silver

Both the ring and earrings become more charming the longer they are worn. The supply of these "TRUE-LOVE-and-Friendship" Rings and earrings is limited.

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What makes both the ring and the matching earrings so unusual and attractive is the twin, pendant hearts that dangle daintily like sentimental and charming settings. The precious **Sterling Silver** ring is extra wide. Both the ring and earrings are beautifully embossed with the very newest "Forget-Me-Not" design with two pendant hearts suitable for engraving initials of loved ones.

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State..... Ring Size.....

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LIV, No. 2 EVERY STORY BRAND NEW February, 1945

Featured Complete Novelet

MURDER CALLS THE TUNE

By W. T. BALLARD

Special Investigator Don Payne barges into a grim game of espionage and intrigue played for high stakes when he tackles the baffling mystery that surrounds the Nevada war town of Desert! 11

Two Other Exciting Novelets

A SHROUD FOR MR. HYDE . . . . . Benton Braden 26
Willie Brann adds a dash of gunpowder to a boiling stew of crime before serving plotters up to the law!

DEATH WEARS A MASK . . . . . Henry Kuttner 58
Ben Hatch of the F. B. I. tries some sleuthing tricks when sudden murder stalks the Magic Window!

Thrilling Short Stories

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Old Criminal Judge Wright was forgetful, but—

Special Features

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Where readers, writers and the editor meet

THE MAN WHO TOOK A WALK . . . . . Samuel Mines 70
The true story of an amazing crime case

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Broadcasting Stations, Aviation Radio, Police Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Radio Manufacturing all offer good jobs to trained Radio men—and most of these fields have a big backlog of business that is building up during the war, plus opportunities to expand into new fields opened by wartime developments. You may never see a time again when it is so easy to get a start in Radio!

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The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that help show how to make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while still learning. I send you SIX big kits of Radio parts as part of my Course. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my illustrated, easy-to-grasp lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building real Radio Circuits—and USE your knowledge to make EXTRA money!

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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

THESE are days when our patrolmen step into doorways for a minute's respite from wintry blasts, and cup hands to frost-nipped ears, and stomp snow from icy brogans, to get circulation going again. So step in behind the green lights, readers, into our nice comfy, cozy Headquarters—and then let us chill you in another way—with the stories we have on the docket for our March issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE!

And MURDER IN THE SKY, the complete mystery novel by G. Wayman Jones, which tops off our March magazine, is a chiller indeed!

Adventurous Johnny Wells, news photographer on the *Gazette*, finds his teeth chattering when he runs up against mysterious murders in Shelton, a little town along the Atlantic coast. And Johnny—as you probably remember from reading past stories about him—is an irrepressible young fellow with a penchant for detecting, who doesn't scare easy.

Murder Everywhere!

The trouble began when Johnny and his beauteous girl-friend, Valerie Grey, took the trail of a certain Alonzo Gregg who had disappeared thirteen months before, with not a cop, F.B.I. man, or private snoop in all the country being able to uncover the least trace of what had happened to him. It smelled like murder.

And then Johnny ran kerplunk into another murder. Only this time the victim was a very close friend of Johnny's—a fellow photographer, a girl named Lila Heath whose work appeared in the big national magazines. Lila was doing a special assignment for the U. S. Army, photographing camouflaged gun-batteries in action, to see how well the camouflage escaped detection by the camera's eye. The guns were supposed to be firing blanks. Yet Lila's plane exploded and came down in a flaming holocaust of death.

No sooner did Johnny and Valerie put their noses in the case than a "soldier" started taking pot-shots at their backs. And when Johnny and Valerie went to visit the late Lila Heath's home, murder was waiting for them.

More Goosebumps

Needless to say, neither Johnny nor Valerie had any appetite for this death that was closing in on them from the dark. Nor did they like "Pincher," the dead Lila's ex-convict assistant who won his nickname from his penchant for pinching people—around their throats! And Lila's hobby of photographing curious gravestones was enough to give even a hardened desk-sergeant goosebumps.

It all ties together into a neat and merry knot at the end—a hang-noose knot around the throat of the guilty killer, but Johnny, our cameraman-detective, has more excitement than he really has a yen for before he solves the mystery of the cold corpse which the killer finds too hot to handle, and which somehow is the tell-tale clue to the strangely disappeared Alonzo Gregg whom you remember, Johnny set out to find right at the start.

The Dead Reach Far

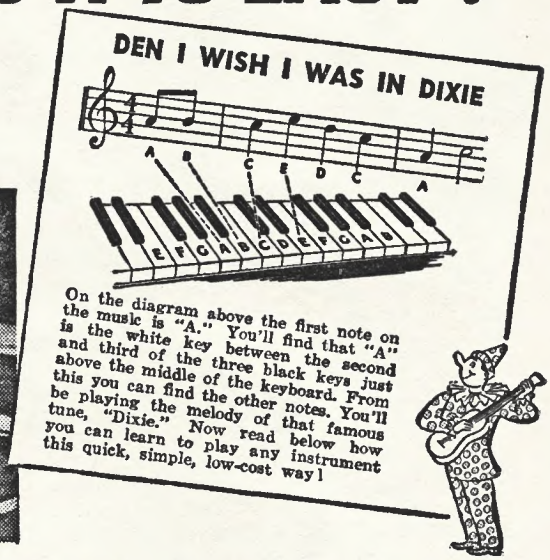
MURDER IN THE SKY is right down-to-earth entertainment, that will shock, thrill, and tickle you pink!

But don't think the chiller-diller proceed-

(Continued on page 8)

LOOKS EASY.....AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



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IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

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Remember, you need no special talent to learn this up-to-date way. And no matter which instrument you choose, the cost averages less than 7c a day. That covers everything . . . printed lessons, sheet music and our Personal Advisory Service . . . no extras of any kind!

But you'll never know how simple and easy it really is to learn music this tried and tested short-cut way until you send for our Free Illustrated Booklet and "Print and Picture" Sample. Then you'll see for yourself how it works. So mail the coupon today . . . don't delay . . . and mention your favorite instrument. U. S. School of Music, 2942 Brunswick Bldg., New York City 10, N. Y. (Est. 1898.)

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*Actual pupils' name on request. Pictures by professional models.

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Name .....
(Please Print)

Street .....

City ..... State .....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age parent must sign this coupon.

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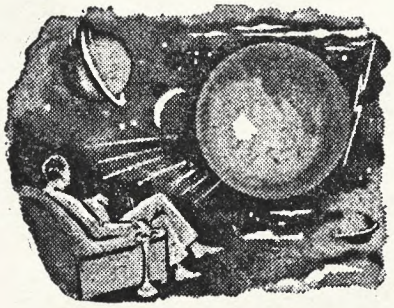
JOURNEY INTO ANOTHER WORLD

yet remain in this one?



ALL of the intelligence of the universe is not centered on this small globe—the earth. Do you know that there are invisible forces and powers beyond this world that can—and do—influence you tremendously? If you could not see or hear, your present world would shrink greatly. Do you also know that you can do the opposite—extend your consciousness so that you can become a citizen of the universe? Stop being earth-bound! Let the Rosicrucian teachings unfold to you how your mind can annihilate space and cause you to experience a oneness with the Infinite and all of its worlds. Experience Cosmic Harmony!

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

ings are done with this one yarn. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Though insurance investigator McPhie in THE DEAD REACH FAR, an exciting novelet by R. Sprague Hall, didn't care if he never did see again such eerie, spine-crawling things as were happening on the old Goady farm.

Inspector McPhie went to the remote farm to see if everything was on the up-an'-up in the death of old man Goady, before his company shelled out on the fat insurance policy. Goady supposedly had been blown to bits by the accidental discharge of a box of dynamite while he was blasting stumps. But something was just the least bit peculiar about what was left of Goady's corpse.

A Spooky Rocking Chair

A lot of other things were peculiar, McPhie discovered on that spooky, fog-wraithed farm. Not least of them was the rocking chair of the deceased man, which plainly seemed to be occupied by the man's ghost, and which was driving the man's daughter crazy with fear. McPhie himself was almost crazy with suspense before he solved the case—with the aid of a severed human hand that a kindly dog came and dropped at his feet as if it were a bone!

If your hair isn't standing on end by the time you've read these two yarns, all we can say is that you must need a toupee. A full docket of fast action, excellent detective short stories round out one of our best issues, packed with reading pleasure from cover to cover!

Letters from Readers

IN THESE days when everyone is working harder, so that a better world for all of us, everywhere, may become a reality, detective stories give us much needed moments of relaxation. We're always glad to hear what you readers think of our efforts in that direction. Ye olde desk sergeant likes pats on the back, but he can take a kick in the breeches too.

(Continued on page 79)

Fight INFANTILE PARALYSIS

JANUARY 14-31

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THIS GIANT, 30-MILE-RANGE, 4-FOOT SUPER-TELESCOPE with SUPER-POWER

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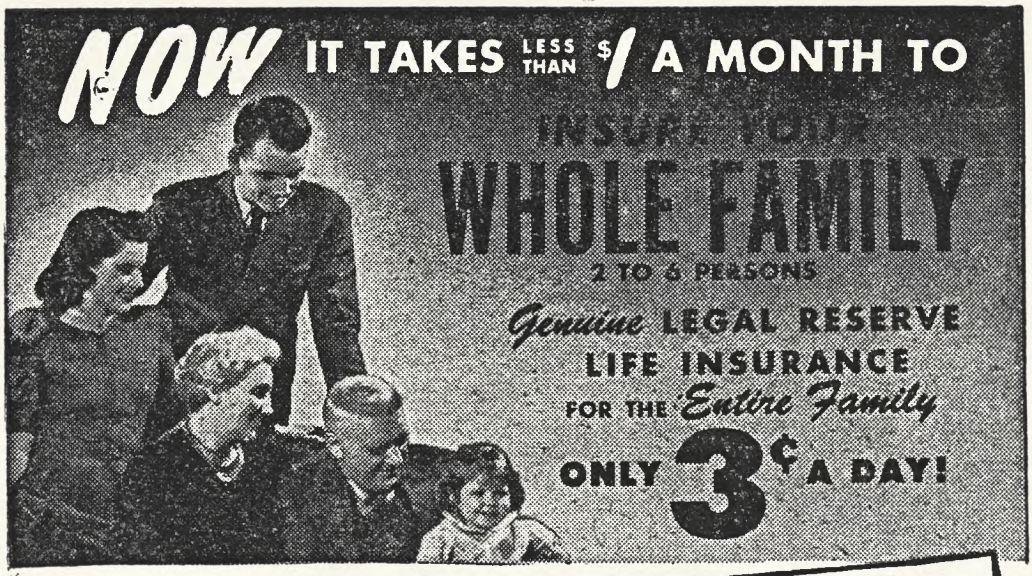

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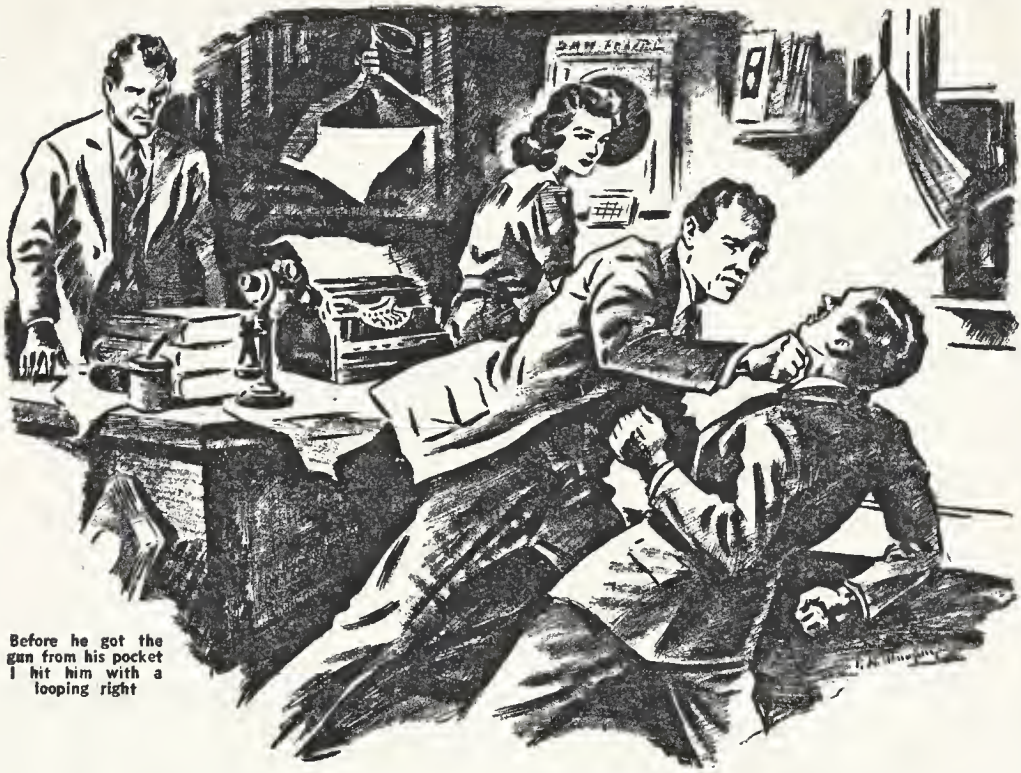
Address _____ *Age* _____
City _____ *State* _____



Before he got the gun from his pocket I hit him with a looping right

MURDER CALLS THE TUNE

By W. T. BALLARD

Special Investigator Don Payne barges into a grim game of espionage and intrigue played for high stakes when he tackles the baffling mystery that surrounds the Nevada war town of Desert!

CHAPTER I

War Center

IT SHOULD have snowed the day Ted Austin died. It was cold enough. But I had hardly noticed the weather. I had had a busy day.

Austin, who was the head of the Desert bank, was no friend of mine, and his death should not have caused me any grief, but it did. It caused me more trouble than I've had in years. In fact, it almost got me hanged.

And that was not the worst. You think there's nothing worse than hanging? Well, pull up a chair and listen.

It started that morning in the office of the *Desert News*. Old Pete Regan ran the sheet and he had been giving me a lot of help. In fact, Pete was the only one in town who knew why I was there, and who I worked for.

I had been posing as a mining engineer, helping the little prospectors search for strategic metals, and by so doing, I had made a lot of enemies among the big mining inter-

AN EXCITING COMPLETE CRIME NOVELET

ests. But that was not my real job.

Actually I'm an investigator for the Alien Property Custodian's office.

Maybe you never heard of it. A lot of people haven't, but it's a mighty important part of our war effort.

The enemy didn't wait to start fighting us until the bombs dropped on Pearl Harbor. He was smarter than that. He started a long time ago, worming his way into our business, getting control of various patents and properties.

As soon as the war started, the alien custodian got busy. He seized enemy-owned plants and patents, he transferred these plants to loyal American management, or ran them himself.

But it was not always as easy as it sounds. The boys we are fighting were smart. They concealed their ownership in a hundred ways, through neutral countries, through holding companies and by using agents who had been in this country for a long time.

The last was where I came in. I had been sent to Desert, Nevada, to investigate the Products Consolidated Metal and Mining Company.

It was a big outfit, not as big as Basic, but big enough so that it was important for us to be certain about the loyalty of the management. And I hadn't been in town twenty-four hours before I ran into trouble.

THE place was a typical war center. Five years ago it had been a sleepy desert railroad town, dragging in a few thousand tourists a year because of the legal gambling. Now there were better than a hundred thousand workers, living in shacks, trailers, auto courts, barracks and even tents.

The Main Street saloons and gambling clubs never closed, and money flowed across their scarred counters in rivers. Not even at the turn of the century when this was the biggest gold producing region in the world had there been anything like this.

And the wolves who live on easy money had moved in. They always do. The first man I had met coming into town was Frank Curtis. Curtis was big time. He had run gambling boats off the Pacific Coast, a club at Palm Springs, and a joint on Sunset Strip which had gathered in thirty or forty thousand movie dollars a week.

I was surprised to see him, and said so. He was a fat man, so fat that his eyes which were blue and round seemed to be buried in the pink mountains which served as his cheeks.

He slapped me with a pudgy hand.

"Don, my boy," he said, "Christmas has come. It's raining twenty-dollar bills and little Frankie is getting his cistern full. You want a job?"

I said that I didn't, and his expression changed.

"Look, pal. I'm mayor of this burg." He saw my surprise, but did not smile. "It was a cinch. They've got a law in this state that after three months' residence, you can vote and run for office. So I spent a little dough, and got myself elected, and if you think I'm going to let a private detective operate unless he's working for me, you can think again."

"I'm not a detective any more," I said. "I'm a mining engineer. That's what I started out to be in the first place, Frankie. The depression sent me into man-hunting because there wasn't any profit in mining then."

He thought this over. I could tell from the way he half closed his small eyes that he didn't know whether I was kidding him or not. He finally decided that I wasn't, and smiled again.

"In that case, maybe I can do you some good," he said. "I know all the big shots. Look me up."

I didn't look him up. I didn't want to. He couldn't have been honest if he had tried, and he never tried. Instead I got in touch with Pete Regan because our office in Los Angeles said he was a safe man.

And then old Pete got sick and his niece, Patricia, tried to run the sheet. The first time I saw her in the *Desert News* office, the place was dirty and littered and confused as only the office of a small town newspaper can get. She stood in the middle of the litter but she did not look as if she belonged.

Her eyes were dark and shadowed until they looked almost violet, her nose was little and cute and had a tendency to turn up at the end. She was cute, and for me the prettiest girl in the world, and at the moment, she was one of the maddest.

"You're crazy," she said. "I've only known you a month and you come around, giving orders as if you were my grandfather."

I didn't want to be her grandfather, and I wasn't trying to give orders. I was only trying to tell her that it wasn't safe for a girl to carry on the fight her uncle had been waging against Frank Curtis and his gang.

"You don't know much about girls," she said, "and less about Regans. We've been here for forty years and if you think I'm going to run from a two-bit gambler—"

She broke off, and I saw her dark eyes widen.

I heard the door behind me swing open and turned to look. The first man I saw coming in was "Dollar" Hammond. He got the name because he was once rumored to have killed a man in a Tia Juana bar for a silver dollar. The second man was "Blackie" Drew. His hair was as dark as the girl's and was stuck down close to his small head

He looked little and harmless—save for the flat gun in his hand

with a heavy oily coating that made it look like a skull cap.

They were surprised to see me, and I could tell from their expression that they didn't like me being there.

"Keep out of this," said Hammond.

I DIDN'T speak, but the girl did. All the anger which had been directed at me was turned on them.

"What do you mean by bursting into my office?" she demanded.

Hammond leered at her. "Stop beating your gums, sister, and listen. I'm the new owner of this sheet. I guess I gotta right in my own office." He winked as if he expected that I would share the joke.

I didn't. Neither did the girl.

"The new owner?" Her anger had been washed away by surprise.

Hammond's smirk changed to a grin. "Right. Bought it from the bank, lock, stock and barrel."

I knew what this meant. These were Frankie Curtis' men. It meant that the mayor, annoyed by the paper, was buying up the opposition.

I glanced toward Pat. Her face was white, but her little chin was up and she was taking it like a soldier. After a moment she turned toward the desk and began emptying it.

"Wait a minute, chick," Hammond said quickly. "Put that stuff back."

"It's mine," she said in a low tone, without looking up. "It doesn't belong to the paper."

His voice got honeyed. "Take it easy, chick. We aren't throwing you out, see. We need an editor and you're it. A hundred a week, which is more than this punk sheet ever earned you."

She straightened, her dark eyes burning.

"Thank you, but I'm leaving. I wish you luck, running this punk sheet."

She gathered her things into a little bundle and started around the desk.

Hammond didn't move. "Blackie," he said.

The small man came forward on his little, highly-polished shoes, walking as mincingly as a woman. One hand twisted at the point of his waxed mustache, the other was out of sight in his pocket.

"Get back, sweetheart," he said. "You're working for us."

The girl stopped. She didn't glance at me. She was not the kind who asked help, but I was ready to take a hand.

"Get out of the way, cute boy," I said, and took a step toward Drew.

His head jerked around in surprise. His eyes were as round and shiny as wet licorice drops. He started to bring the hand from his pocket, but before he got the flat gun clear of the cloth's edge, I hit him hard with a looping right.

His black eyes crossed, his knees spread-eagled. He went down like a folding ironing board to land hard against the dirty roughness of the floor. His gun slid from his hand, falling almost at my feet. I scooped it up, covering Hammond.

But the big man never moved.

"Frankie won't like this," he said. "Frankie won't like this at all."

Outside, the girl touched my arm. Her face was dead white and had a strained look as if she didn't quite believe what had happened.

"Don," she said, "you shouldn't have hit him. Those men are dangerous. They won't forget."

I was breathing a little heavily. "I don't mean them to," I told her. "I don't like being pushed around by squirrels like Dollar Hammond and his pardner, and I like it less when they put their dirty hands on you."

But she wasn't listening. Her small lower lip was caught by her white teeth. "I can't understand," she said thoughtfully. "My uncle borrowed money on the paper and signed it over to the bank, but—"

"Ted Austin sold you out," I told her.

"You're crazy!" She sounded plenty angry. "I've known Ted Austin since I could walk."

I didn't argue. Never argue with an angry woman. I'd learned that much. In a way I was glad this had happened. It would take the pressure off of her, but I meant to have a slight talk with Austin. If he were lining up with the Curtis gang I wanted to know it.

MY MIND was on this, not on the crowd which packed the sidewalk, and I didn't see the big Mayor until the girl took a quick step forward, then stopped. I had to stop to keep from running into her and, looking up, I found we were facing the Mayor.

He bowed a little and the next instant wished that he hadn't, for the girl swung the heavy leather purse she was carrying. It caught Curtis flush on his fat jowl. The blow was hard and might have knocked a lesser man from his feet. It didn't budge Curtis, but it must have hurt.

And the girl's voice cut like a knife.

"Let that be a warning, you fat crook! Keep your hoodlums out of my way! The next time I'll use a gun!"

She turned quickly and pushed her way through the fast gathering crowd, leaving us staring at each other.

"Whew!" said Frank Curtis. He pulled out a white silk handkerchief and dabbed at a cheek which was already showing a purple tinge. "What a wildcat! Better pen her, Payne, or I'll have to clip her claws. Yes sir, I'll have to clip her claws."

I wasn't conscious of the crowd, or of who I was or why I was there.

"Don't touch her," I said softly. "Don't put one little finger on her or I'll deflate you, my fat friend. I'll puncture you, so help me."

Then I turned and crossed the street, conscious that he was staring after me with small, unfriendly eyes.

CHAPTER II

Into the Trap

I SHOULDN'T have gone out to the Austin ranch that night. The troubles of the Regans were none of my business. I had things to do, and those things certainly did not call for me to be mixing into other people's personal quarrels. I didn't like young Austin. I suspected that he was mixed up in Products Consolidated, and I wanted to know how much, but I also wanted to know why he had chosen to sell the Regans out to Frank Curtis, and I meant to ask him.

The house was old, built along the underground stream which forms the valley above town. A dozen ranches dot this valley, following the course of the underground water, and the Austin place was one of the most pretentious.

I pulled into the long drive and parked my car, noticing the coupé which was pulled around the corner of the house, but not thinking much about it as I turned up the path. I had covered half the distance to the porch when the shot came.

It was sharp and clear like the crack of a whip and there could be no mistake. It came from within.

I never broke stride as I started to run. Three low steps led to the porch and I took them at a bound, crossing the wide uneven boards in two jumps.

But as I reached the door the screen banged back in my face and I had a glimpse of a dim form in the half darkness.

I swung around the screen and grabbed, getting an arm. I was foolish of course. I might have got a bullet, or a knife between my ribs, but I wasn't thinking any too clearly.

"Hold it!" I yelled.

"Don!" It was Pat Regan, and her word was a cross between a gasp and a cry. "Don, thank heaven!"

I realized that my fingers must be cutting their way half through her arm and eased my grasp.

"Pat, honey," I said quickly, "what happened? What are you doing here?"

"It's Ted!" she said. "He was standing beside his desk, talking to me. Someone shot him, shot him through the window."

"Hold on to yourself," I said. "I'll have to call the police, but I'll be standing by."

It did not take the law long to get to the ranch. Ted Austin's importance saw to that. And right away Pat and I were in for a grilling.

The Police Chief was small and dried-up and looked as if he would blow away in a good desert wind. The man with him was tall and thin, with a long, yellow, skullish face. The medical examiner also had come and was bending over Austin's body.

"So you don't know who killed him?" the Chief asked me for about the twentieth time.

I was getting tired of the question. It had been asked so many times.

"I don't," I said. "I've told you before, and I'm not going to tell you again. All you seem able to do is to repeat yourself, like a parrot."

The Chief looked angry. The man with him was named Mallon. He came over and towered above me, his pointed hat making him look taller than he really was.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, cousin," he growled at me, "or we'll take it out and braid it around your ears."

It was dawning on me that these were Frank Curtis' men, and that they were taking a huge delight in riding me.

"The devil with you," I said, "and Curtis, and all his works."

Mallon hit me. He was so tall that he looked almost thin. He wasn't. His shoulders were heavy and there was a lot of power in them. My head snapped back so hard that I thought for an instant my neck was fractured. I slammed against the wall bookcase and it was all I could do to keep from falling.

Mallon followed me in, like a cat waiting for a mouse to try and jump. I had no chance. My head was spinning, my knees weak, and another blow would have polished me off. But Pat Regan chose that moment to take a hand. She stepped forward and her heavy leather purse beat against the side of Mallon's round head.

He swung, startled by this new attack, and it gave me the second I needed to clear my head. I closed in as Mallon clawed for his gun, driving my right to his angular jaw while I wrenched the gun free with my left. Then I turned to face the Chief, Mallon's gun held ready.

HE WAS surprised, and he didn't like it. "Gimme that gun, Payne!" he ordered.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I'll just keep it to make certain that you boys don't have any more ideas."

"You'll give it to me," he said. "And you won't argue. I'm giving you exactly an hour to get in your car and head out of the state.

If you don't, we take care of you. We'll put you away for a long time, a long, long time. Just think that over."

"And if I go?" I was watching him.

His eyes got shrewd. "Then we'll lay off the girl." His voice was almost soft. "We might even give her the paper back, if she learns to behave herself. We aren't hunting trouble, Payne. We're smart."

I shouldn't have agreed to do what he said, but at the time it seemed like my only possible move. I was scared, not for myself, but for Pat Regan. The whole thing looked like a steal, but from where I stood it didn't look as if it had anything to do with the Alien Property office. It merely looked like a bunch of smart gamblers who had seen a good thing and moved in to take advantage.

Certainly my hands were tied. I had brought the Regans nothing but trouble, and hadn't done myself any good, so I made a deal.

As soon as I got back to town I went down to see Monte Kirk. Monte was an old-timer too. He had been practising law in that county ever since the last war. I told him what had happened, and that I was getting out. I gave him some money and asked him to look after the Regans' interests, then I drove by the Regans' house to say good-by to old Pete and took the road for L. A.

Pete was so sick that I don't think he even knew I was there. He had been a big man, but his body looked curiously shrunken under the thin blanket. It hurt me to see him lying there.

I thought about it as I picked up the road which led straight west toward the gap in the distant mountains. On my right, a couple of miles across the desert, I could see the big, bunched outline of the Products Consolidated smelters looming dark and angry against the star-speckled sky.

I drove an hour in silence, then I couldn't take it any longer. Reaching down, I switched on my radio. Ahead, a jack-rabbit decided to race the car for a couple of hundred feet and almost lost, just cutting off into the brush in time.

The desert looked calm and peaceful under the three-quarter moon and I wondered when I was going to see it again. Then the announcer's voice cut into the music which had been pouring almost unheard from the radio.

"Flash!" the voice said. "Chief Bowles just announced an arrest in the ranch slaying of Banker Ted Austin. Pat Regan, niece of the local newspaper publisher, has been taken into custody. It is rumored that her accomplice, a Los Angeles private detective named Donald Payne who has been posing as a mining engineer, escaped and is thought to be fleeing the state. The California authorities have been warned and it is not believed that Payne will get far."

I braked the car, swearing under my breath, waiting for the announcer to continue, but that was all. The music came back on.

I glanced at the rear-view mirror. Another twenty-five miles and I would have driven up to the Border patrol station at Yermo, driven up without warning.

I glanced at the rear-view mirror. The road behind me was dark, and straight as a string for miles, with not a soul on it. Gas rationing had certainly made a difference.

Grimly I spun the wheel. I could picture Curtis and Chief Bowles and their pals grinning as they thought how Don Payne had walked wide-eyed into their trap.

My job now was to walk out of it.

Did you ever try and hide a car on the desert? Maybe it sounds easy, but that's only because you don't know the desert. The light brush won't conceal much and the soft sand makes it tricky to get far from the road. In the end, I didn't try. I drove right back into the town of Desert again, passing the towering bulk of the Products Consolidated plant.

I figured that Frank Curtis and his men would be so busy patting themselves on the back for steering me into the trap that it would never occur to them that I would come back.

I GUESS I was right. I drove onto the main street, found a parking place beside the new Sears Building and walked away. The street crowd was even heavier than it had been that afternoon. There was not much chance of me being found unless I ran into Curtis or one of his men face to face.

I tried to take good care that I didn't do this as I headed for the lawyer's office, wondering if I would be lucky enough to catch him there. I was. I saw the thread of light under the door as I climbed the worn stairs.

The door was not locked and I thrust it open, to find the small lawyer at his desk. The building had been built for some thirty years and most of the desert dust which had blown in during that time was still lodged in the hall. But Kirk's office was as clean as a mess hall.

He looked up, his tight-lipped mouth drooping a little beneath the edge of his close-lipped mustache.

"Payne," he said, "I thought you were half-way to Los Angeles by now."

"Sure," I told him grimly. "A number of people in this doublecrossing town had it figured that I'd run right into the California cops. What'd you do, Kirk—sell me out?

I paid you money to keep the girl in the clear."

He made a gesture with one small hand. "I was afraid you'd think that."

My laugh had no amusement. "What else could I think?"

"You don't know this town very well." His tone was level, unhurried. "Frank Curtis has the whole place in his vest pocket. The cops take their orders from him and if anyone else trys to get out of line, Dollar Hammond or Blackie Drew takes care of them."

"You're not just kidding," I told him. "So you're scared. You don't want to play? How about giving me back the two bills I handed you."

For answer he drew a gold-rimmed leather case from his inside pocket and laid two one-hundred-dollar bills on the desk between us.

"I'm not scared," he said, his voice mild and low. "I've been in this country twenty years, and I don't run from men like Curtis, but I also don't take money under false pretenses. When I accepted your retainer, I didn't know that they were going to turn the heat on, as the saying goes. It's on now, and nobody in this world can turn it off but Curtis."

I stared at him, getting a cold feeling around the pit of my stomach. I couldn't make this little fellow out. He was so meek and quiet.

He wouldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds, dripping wet, and he was supposed to be one of the best lawyers in town. Yet he hadn't tied up with Curtis, not visibly at least, nor was he tied up with the big mining interests like Products Consolidated.

But I had plenty of respect for him, and what he said worried me. I had been around long enough to know that Curtis and his crowd would not hesitate, if it served their purpose, to pin Ted Austin's murder on the girl. To them everything was played on a percentage basis, with the percentage always for the house.

In my worry about Pat, I forgot entirely that I was implicated, and that the first cop I was unfortunate enough to meet would pick me up.

"Don't let it bother you," I told the little lawyer. "I'll take care of it. I'll take care of it in my own way."

Then I turned and left the office, shutting the door quietly behind me.

I don't know what I meant by that last remark. I was sore and hurt and worried, and I didn't mean much of anything. I went back down the dirty stairs, trying to figure what to do next. My head was filled with a lot of wild ideas. I could bust Pat out of jail. It shouldn't be too hard a job. The building was old, and there wouldn't be more than one man on guard.

I could bust her out, and I knew the mountain and desert roads as well as I know Hollywood Boulevard. I could get away. But what then? At least, I thought, she would have a better chance than she would in this gambler-controlled town.

CHAPTER III

Beyond the Law

YOU don't realize how much you depend upon the law until you reach a spot where there is no law. It was a game in which I didn't have a chance. Everything was stacked against me. If I used a gun, I was wrong; if they used one on me, they were merely trying to make an arrest. My lips hurt and I realized that I had been pressing them tightly against my teeth. I relaxed a little. This would never do. I had to think.

Who had killed Ted Austin, and why? Was I sure that Pat hadn't? It was easy enough to imagine her temper getting the best of her, and her doing something in anger. But I couldn't believe that she would lie to me afterward. No, I was certain in my own mind that she hadn't killed him. I had to be certain. The girl meant too much to me for me to harbor any doubts.

But if she hadn't killed him, who had, and why? Had Curtis used one of his killers to strike Austin down? But why should the fat man wish to kill the banker? Austin had shown no sign of trying to buck the gamblers. In fact, if anything, he had gone out of his way to play ball with them.

Was it a matter of profits? Had Austin had an interest in Curtis' games, and had they quarreled over the spoils? That was a possibility of course. But in reality, I had no reason to suspect the gambler of murder except for his obvious efforts to pin the killing on the girl and on me.

There might be another reason for this. It might be merely an effort on his part to get rid of her, but since he already had her newspaper, she could not be dangerous to him.

And then a thought came which made me pause half-way down the dirty, ill-lit stairs. "Maybe he was after me. Maybe he had found out why I was in Nevada and wanted to be rid of me, yet didn't dare move through ordinary channels since he was certain that my office would ask embarrassing questions."

I swore softly under my breath and went on down the stairs.

Habit made me pause at the bottom and peer out through the soiled glass panes of the door before I emerged onto the crowded sidewalk. It was getting late, but there was no sign of slackening in the crowds. If anything they seemed thicker than they had been earlier and I could not help but wonder when the workers found time for sleep.

I saw no cops, and no one whom I recognized. Reassured, I pushed the door open and stepped out, pausing to light a cigarette.

That pause saved my life. I didn't hear the sound of the shot. Whoever fired had used a silencer, but the bullet struck the brick wall, close to my cheek, throwing a million particles of baked red dust into my eyes.

I dropped to the sidewalk. Most of the people on that walk must have thought I was crazy. After all, none of them had heard the shot and I doubt if any had noticed the splatter of brick dust which the bullet made as it struck.

But I wasted no time wondering what they thought. My dropping had been the best thing I could have done. The crowd served as a screen. The unseen marksman couldn't have got a second shot at me if he had tried.

The fall had been purely instinctive, man's effort to find shelter in the face of danger. But now that I was on the sidewalk, I was in no hurry to rise.

I lot of well-meaning chumps tried to help me to my feet. They were rough, tough workers from the plants, and it took a good man to stand the work.

I wondered what would happen if I told them my story. I've seen mobs, and I'm afraid of them. I knew that all I had to do was to leap up and tell them Pat Regan's story—tell them that a lone girl had had her newspaper stolen from her, that even now she was locked in the town jail, charged with a crime she had not committed.

Yes, I would have an audience, and fifteen minutes later they would be tearing down the jail. They were that kind of men, and they were bored and lonesome in this desert town, despite the crowded gambling clubs and the overflowing bars. But that kind of action would not solve anything, any more than it would help for me to rescue the girl from the jail. To clear up this mess I had to find out who actually had killed Ted Austin. What was worse, I had to prove it. . . .

THE jail looked grim enough. It was an old brick building with narrow, barred windows and barred doors. I walked around it twice, wondering just how I was going to talk to Pat without the old jailer knowing it.

I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to find out how badly she had been treated. That would govern my course of action. If any of Curtis' plug-uglies had pushed her around, I meant to face the Mayor down and take it out of his fat hide.

But there was no way to tell from the outside of the old building where Pat was being held. I had hoped that her cell window would show a light. The trouble was that too many of them showed lights.

That left me one alternative—to go inside.

I felt in my pocket to make certain that the gun I had rescued from my hotel room was in place, and then moved toward the entrance, praying that the old jailer wouldn't recognize me or guess who I was.

But I never got inside. For I had hardly reached the first step when Dollar Hammond came into view.

Evidently he had been waiting behind one of the pillars and he was much pleased with himself.

"We've been waiting for you, Payne," he said, "ever since Blackie spotted your car parked downtown. We figured you'd probably be fool enough to try and rescue your girl friend. Get your hands up."

He had made the same mistake that a lot of people make in this world. He had spent too much time talking.

Apparently I hadn't moved. Actually I had shifted my weight from one foot to the other and swung a little sideward so that I was poised to leap toward the darkness of the wide lawn.

I did just that. I must have jumped ten feet although I didn't stop to measure it. I lit running, crouching low so that I wouldn't make too good a target against the curtain of the distant street lights.

I heard the spatty *pang* of Hammond's automatic, and his curse, mingled with the sound of the shot, then his shouted instructions to Blackie and the pound of feet on the hard turf behind me.

I headed toward the business section, partly because I was already headed that way and partly because I figured that they would hardly dare shoot me down with the Main Street crowd as an audience. There were certain limits that even the Curtis gang would not dare to pass.

I gained the sidewalk, crossed it and ran down the broad paved street. I couldn't be certain whether my pursuers were still trailing me or not.

I heard an auto coming and concluded that probably one of the cops had joined the chase in a squad car. If this was so, then I was a gone goose. My heart was already beginning to pound and my breath got short.

There was no use ducking out of the road. I was safer there in the lighted street than anywhere else, but I did cut to one side so that the car could pass me.

It didn't. I could tell by the sound that it was slowing down, although I didn't waste any of my flagging energy by looking around.

"Payne, get in here." It was a voice that I didn't immediately recognize, but it certainly was not the voice of one of Curtis' men, and a drowning man doesn't look too closely at the boat that rescues him.

I turned and raced toward the sedan which was now barely moving. Its rear door swung open and I half-jumped, half-fell inside, landing with one hand on the seat, the other on the floor.

Before I managed to right myself, the car had gathered speed and swung sharply left around the nearest corner.

"Shut the door," the driver said without bothering to turn his head. He was alone in the car, save for me.

I got my feet straightened out and slammed the door, then I stepped over the back of the front seat and slid to a place beside the driver.

Even as I did my mind was racing, for my rescuer was Emil Boyston, the general manager of the Products Consolidated Metal and Mining Company, one of the men I had come to Nevada to watch, and certainly no friend of mine.

His first words confirmed this.

"You've caused me a lot of trouble, Payne," he said, without once glancing in my direction. "You've encouraged small prospectors to hold out for absurd prices for their claims. I can't make you out. Maybe you're a busybody, or maybe you just figure that if you make enough of a nuisance of yourself, we'll buy you out to get rid of you."

HE STOPPED as if he expected me to answer, but I didn't. I just sat there, silent, fighting to get my breath back, fingering my gun and trying to figure what his game was.

After a couple of minutes of silence he went on as if he had given up hope that I would answer.

"You're wondering why I should help you, since I feel this way. Well, I don't like Frank Curtis either, and I do rather admire the Regan girl. I've put up with Curtis because in some ways he's been useful to us, and I can't afford to break with him openly. That's why I was in such a hurry to get away from the neighborhood of the jail before his hired killers recognized this car."

The steel band which had been pressing at my aching lungs was loosening a little and as I got my breath, some of my confidence returned.

"Okay," I said. "So you helped me, so why? That's what you're waiting for me to ask, isn't it?"

"You like to be tough," he said, and I could tell nothing from his tone.

"No." I was careful, choosing the right words. "I'm not tough, Boyston. But ever since I walked into this country someone has been trying to shove me around. I don't like it. Up until now, I haven't shoved back, but I think this is my night to start. Just what do you think you'll accomplish by helping me? This is an empty country. It's a hard place for a man to hide in unless you take to the canyon, and I never cared much for living in caves."

He made a sound which might have been a chuckle or a grunt. I couldn't see his face plainly in the little light which came from the illuminated dash panel.

"I hadn't thought about it," he said, slowly. "I was driving along, saw you running down the street and guessed what must be happening, so I picked you up. What do you suggest that I do now?"

"Let me off at the next corner," I told him.

"And let Curtis' wolves corner you? They know now that you're in town and they'll search the place with a fine-tooth comb."

I shrugged. "What would you suggest? Maybe I could go out to the dam and hide in Lake Meade if some of the soldiers guarding the place didn't take a shot at me as I came into the reservation."

"Why not come out to my place and we'll have a drink while we think about it. I hardly think Curtis or his boys will try searching out there."

I looked at him again, trying to figure what was behind the masklike face, the even words.

"Why not?" I said suddenly. "What have I got to lose? But don't forget, Boyston, I'm wanted for murder, and in helping me, you're laying yourself wide open to the law."

He shrugged and I gathered that he didn't have much respect for the law as practiced in that part of the country.

CHAPTER IV

WANTED FOR MURDER

THE house was as surprising as the man. It was long, low, and built of hollow concrete blocks to keep out the heat. Sensible construction for that part of the country, it still looked like a fort. As we turned into the curving drive I couldn't help but wonder if Boyston didn't have a couple

of machine-guns planted around somewhere, covering the entrance.

When I got inside the man's appearance was not reassuring. He looked more like an unhappy bulldog than anything else. His face jutted out at the bottom under the edge of the tight-clipped gray mustache, and his eyes, sheltered by shaggy overhanging brows, were as hard as gray steel.

I had followed him into a long, low, book-lined room whose floor was covered with heavy blue Chinese rugs. The room didn't belong in that country, and a lot of money had been spent on it.

"Well, Payne,"—there wasn't any friendliness in the words as he moved to a small portable bar and mixed me a drink—"just what do you think you're going to do now?"

I had no idea, and the edge of mockery in his voice made the short hairs at the back of my neck prickle. I wondered suddenly whether I was merely being kidded or whether this gray man with the close-cut hair and out-thrust jaw was trying to pump me.

"I'll handle Curtis," I said with a lot more confidence than I actually felt.

Apparently he was paying no attention to my answer for he had turned to one of the windows and pulled one of the drapes aside so that he could look out.

"I think you'll have your chance," he said dryly. "Here comes Curtis now, and he has brought enough friends with him to make certain you don't get away."

I made a grab toward the gun in my pocket and stopped. It wasn't there. The pocket was empty.

I took a quick step toward Boyston and saw his lips twist a little under the edge of his mustache.

"I noticed it in the car," he said. "Made quite a bulge, you know, and since I wasn't certain just how you would act, I removed it."

"Remove it back," I said. "Quick, before Curtis and his boys arrive for their little job of murder."

He shook his head. "Sorry, Payne. I left it in the car, but I'll do my best to protect you."

I was certain that his best was not going to be good enough. I turned and started for the door, but it was too late for Dollar Hammond stepped into the opening, grinning at me.

"In a hurry?" he asked.

I backed away from him. This was not the way I had planned to die, but there didn't seem to be much choice. Murder was calling the tune that night and it seemed to have caught up with Don Payne.

Hammond came into the room. He had his gun in his hand and he was watching me with close attention.

"In here, Boss," he said.

Curtis followed him in, moving lightly despite his weight, then came Blackie Drew who glanced quickly about, his dark eyes moving like a striking snake. Then he took a position on the opposite side of the door from the one that Hammond had chosen.

Boyston did not move, but his voice cut out like a thrown knife.

"What are you doing here, Mayor?"

The fat man shifted his small feet uncertainly. In spite of the guns in his men's hands, he did not seem as sure of himself as he usually was.

"Now look," he told the plant manager. "We don't want trouble with you, sir. But Dollar recognized your car as the one that picked up this killer, and we—the police rather—want him."

"And since when have these gunmen been police?" Boyston demanded.

Curtis seemed relieved. "Oh, the police are out back. They were making sure that Payne didn't escape while we were coming in the front way. I'll call them."

He half turned, but Boyston stopped him.

"Never mind. I don't think so much of our honorable Police Force that I want to look at them. And another point. I don't recall inviting you here, or leaving the door open, and I don't see anyone with a search warrant. Maybe you'd like to answer to a charge of breaking and entering?"

I STOOD there listening, trying to figure what Boyston was up to. He had me puzzled and I could see by Curtis' fat face that the Mayor didn't understand the play any better than I did.

"I wouldn't talk about charges."

He tried to make his voice threatening, but somehow failed. He was tough, and there was not much that he wouldn't do, but I sensed that Boyston, alone, without gunmen at his back was the tougher of the two and that Curtis was afraid of him. But despite his nervousness, the fat man went on.

"You must realize that you're making yourself liable to serious trouble, harboring a murderer. Why?"

"I don't know." Boyston sounded genuinely puzzled. "I don't like Payne, and he's caused me plenty of trouble. I gave him a lift on impulse, and I don't give a hoot what happens to him later, but I invited him here for a drink and he's going to get it. Now, clear out, and if you lay a finger on him while he's on my property, I'll settle with you. Get going."

Curtis licked his fat lips in a misery of uncertainty. For an instant, I thought he

was going to refuse, then he wavered, lost his nerve and turned.

"Come on, boys. There'll be time later."

"No," said Dollar Hammond. "That punk has done all the pushing around he's ever going to do. I'll settle this now."

Curtis may have been afraid of Boyston, but he was not afraid of Hammond. He had been giving the gunman orders for too many years.

"Shut up," he said.

Hammond never looked toward his fat chief. His eyes were on me, burning with hate, and he slowly raised his gun.

"This is it," he said, between his teeth.

Curtis moved with surprising speed. His thick arm came up, striking Hammond's wrist. The gun flew out of the man's hand, spinning across the floor. Blackie Drew half-turned, uncertain whether to help Hammond or the Mayor. He shouldn't have turned, he shouldn't have taken his eyes off of me, for I jumped toward the gun which was still turning slowly on the carpet, scooping it up and straightening as Blackie, realizing his mistake, swung back.

"Drop it!" I told him savagely.

He dropped it. He'd had all the trouble with me that he wanted.

Hammond had shaken off the fat man and was advancing toward me, ignoring the gun, his big hands working slowly at his sides.

"Shoot!" he sneered. "You haven't got the nerve. A shot will bring in the cops."

I didn't answer. I took a quick step toward him, swinging with my free hand. He ducked sideward. That was just what I wanted him to do, for I slapped the side of his hard round head with the gun.

Lucky for him that his head was hard, because I put all I had into that swing. He went down without a sound, but I didn't waste time watching him. Blackie might have recovered his gun, but things were moving a little too fast for Blackie. He was staring down at Dollar's still form, his black eyes bugging out a little, the points of his mustache sagging.

I glanced around quickly, saw a closet to the right, and herded Boyston, Blackie and Curtis toward it. "This is poor return for my picking you up," Boyston said.

I had no time to argue. "In," I told him. "I might shoot you. It would be safer."

He took one look at my face and turned toward the closet without a word. Curtis lowered his bull-like head and glared at me wordless for a moment, then decided to follow Boyston.

I took a look outside, just to make certain that the cops were still guarding the rear of the house. They must have been, for they weren't in sight. Both Boyston's and the police car were standing in the driveway. I took the police car since it was blocking the way, but I wasted a minute to pull loose the distributor head from Boyston's Cad.

Someone yelled from the back yard as I tramped down on the starter, but before whoever it was could charge around the house, I had backed into the highway and was headed for town.

I had an impulse to turn on the siren. I had always wanted to drive a police car, but I didn't want to attract any more attention than was necessary, since I meant to get Pat out of jail.

There shouldn't be anyone at the old building save the jailer, but I didn't have too much time. The police would release Boyston, Curtis and his men, and the chase would be on.

THE building looked quiet when I slid my stolen car into the drive and went in through the jail entrance. There wasn't anyone in the stuffy little office and I poked my head through the door which led to the single block of cells.

"Pop," the old jailer, was standing about half-way down the dirty passage, his back toward me. The light was not too good and

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

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Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

for a full moment I didn't recognize the second man who was talking to someone through the bars of one of the cells. Then I realized that it was the little lawyer, Kirk, and that he must be talking to Pat.

I pulled Hammond's gun clear of my pocket and eased forward. The old jailer never heard me until I was so close that the gun barrel almost touched the hollow between his sagging shoulders.

"Hold it, Pop." My voice was low, but it carried its warning.

He stiffened. This man had spent most of his life in the West, a good two-thirds of it in guarding prisoners in this very jail.

He didn't make the mistake of trying to be a hero. It was not that he was a coward. He just was too smart. He knew when the odds were not on his side.

He raised scrawny hands. From his right dangled a big ring which supported half a dozen big keys. I reached out and lifted this ring as Kirk turned and saw me.

"Payne!" His sharp voice held no particular pleasure, yet he seemed neither surprised nor disconcerted. "What are you doing here?"

"I came for Pat," I said, nudging the old man forward with the nose of the gun. "Careful, Pop. I wouldn't want to shoot you."

He had already dropped his gun, and I didn't bother to pick it up. I eased him forward to where I could see the girl through the bars.

"Hi, Chick."

Her "Hi!" was a little weak. She sounded tired and a little scared. Not like the girl that had been so certain she could take care of herself.

I used the keys to open her door and Kirk was forced to step back.

"This isn't wise, Payne," he said, and his tone held sharp disapproval. "If you take her out of here now, it will be almost as if you both confessed to killing Austin."

I paid no attention. "Come on, Chick. Get moving. Pop wants to use your cell for a while."

She hesitated, her eyes drifting from Kirk to me, then back to the little lawyer.

"I don't know, Don," she said. "I'm so tired I can't think clearly. Mr. Kirk has been pulling some wires. He came here to tell me that he would probably have me out by morning."

"He promised to keep you out altogether," I said harshly. "Come on—we haven't got all night. Our charming boy friends will be back here in a little while, howling for my blood. Do you want to see them again tonight?"

A shudder passed through her slender body and she moved toward the door.

"This puts me in an odd position, Payne," Kirk said. "As a lawyer, I'm an officer of the court. If I stand by and watch my client escape, I'll be liable as an accessory to her escape."

I grinned, but I was not amused. "Okay, my friend. Get in the cell with Pop."

"But—"

"Get in." My voice was harsh. "I've no time to argue. I'm liable to be hung for Austin's death. I might as well hang for killing you as for a murder that I didn't commit."

"Don!" Pat grasped my arm. "Don, you don't mean that. Monte Kirk is my friend, my uncle's friend. He's an old-timer here. He's been in this country since before the other war."

"I don't care how long he's been here," I said grimly. "He's got to prove that he's a friend. People have been shooting at me around this town long enough. I'm getting tired of it. From now on, I'm calling the turn." I glanced at Kirk. "Get in that cell."

He got in, and I locked the door.

"You're only making things worse," Pat said sharply. "We haven't got a chance to get away from here and you know it. You're only making us look guilty, pulling this escape."

I glanced toward the cell. The old jailer had retreated to the far end and dropped down on the iron bunk. Kirk was standing just inside the barred door. I was pretty certain that the old jailer couldn't overhear as I said to the girl in a low tone:

"We won't try to get away. We'll go out to the Products Metal plant. Boyston protected me once tonight. Maybe he will again."

I turned, grasping her arm and pulling her after me before she could argue.

CHAPTER V

Magnesium Burns

AGAINST the back-drop of the desert the plant looked huge. It was huge, and it was hard to believe that a short two years before the company had been a small affair, operating a couple of mills in the northern part of the state. Magnesium was the answer. Magnesium, cheap power from the dam, and war. There was one other factor, a process developed in Switzerland for removing the metal. That process had made me suspicious of the lay-out from the first. I was pretty certain that German money had helped develop it, and that the Germans would not take kindly to our using it against them.

The guard stopped us at the gate. He was a long, lanky fellow with sandy hair and a Southern drawl. He looked like exactly what he was, a plant guard, but he grinned when he saw me.

"How they going, Chief?"

"I'm accused of murder," I said, "And that's not good. What about your end?"

He spread his hands. "No soap. Jerry has searched the office twice. Maybe we're wrong."

I shrugged. "Maybe we are," I said.

At the moment it didn't seem too important whether enemy interests held a share of the huge plant or not. I was more concerned about the safety of the girl at my side.

"Look," I said. "The local law may show up, trying to grab us. I'm going to hide down in the storage building. Jerry's on guard down there and we should be safe. I wish Ted Austin had never been killed. Not that he's any great loss, but his death certainly has us behind the eight ball."

"You mean the banker?" The guard sounded interested. "That's funny. That's the only thing that Jerry learned when he searched the office files—the only suspicious thing, I mean. Austin was trustee for a lot of voting stock. Now why should he be that? The company is no longer locally owned. At least, if it is the records don't show."

I stared at him. "Say that again."

He repeated the words, and I swore softly under my breath.

"Maybe I've been stupid," I said. "I guess I have at that."

He looked hopeful, but I didn't go on.

"We'll go on down to the storage place," I said instead. "As soon as you go off duty, call the boss in L. A. and tell him what's happened. I don't dare try to use a phone."

Once inside the fence I felt pretty safe. I had a faked badge pinned to my coat, one which the guard had given me.

"I don't get this, Don," Pat said in a puzzled tone. "Why did that guard speak to you as he did? Who are you, anyhow? What are you doing in this country?"

I hesitated. There wasn't any real reason why I shouldn't tell her now. I had muffed the job badly, and I had let someone pull the wool over my eyes, for I was pretty certain by now that I knew who had killed Ted Austin. I was not exactly certain why the banker had been killed, but I thought I knew, and by coming here I had played more or less into the murderer's hands. Or maybe I hadn't. Maybe he would play into mine, as I had originally hoped.

"I'm with the Alien Custodian's office," I told Pat. "It's our job to take over any property owned by enemy aliens. Your uncle knows who I am, and why I'm here."

Her eyes got wide. "You mean that you think Ted—"

"I mean," I told her, "that Ted was acting as voting trustee for a block of stock in this concern. The point to remember is that he was only the trustee, that someone was hiding behind his front."

"Won't the company books show it?"

I shook my head. "There are ways and ways of doing things, and the man we're fighting is clever. But let's don't worry about him right now. Let's worry about us."

I didn't say "you" because I knew she would resent it. She was an independent girl, Pat was, and I was just beginning to catch on. The reason she had never given me a tumble was because I had never shown any need for help.

That kind of woman likes to baby their men a little, and if that was what she wanted, I was going to play helpless as the devil, at least until I got her. After that, we would see. Anyhow it would be interesting—if we lived.

The storage building was well-guarded. Did you ever see magnesium burn? Even if you haven't seen an incendiary bomb, you've seen fireworks on the Fourth-of-July.

This was the stuff which they had used to burn most of Berlin and a lot of other enemy cities, and they were not taking any chances.

JERRY came out of the shadows and stopped us. He was a small man, and he had worked with me before. That's one reason that I had asked the Chief to send him down and had him wangle a guard's job at the plant. Some twenty of the guards were our men, but no one knew it.

I told him what had happened in a few quick words, and he nodded.

"The office is empty," he said. "You're safe in there until daylight. After that, we'll see. The boys will never let the law get their fingers on you."

The office in the storage building was a small, rather bare affair for the use of the shipping clerk and his aides.

I arranged a couple of chairs for Pat, and then paced restlessly back and forth. I didn't really expect anything to happen. Jerry was on guard outside, but I still wanted to be ready.

However my senses must have been dulled by fatigue for I did not hear the man who came in, did not know that we were not alone in the room until he spoke. I had just dropped down in a chair.

"You think you're clever, don't you Payne?"

I turned quickly. He had not entered by

the entrance that the girl and I had used. Instead he had come in from the storage rooms. But he was in the room, looking small and harmless save for the flat black gun which he held loosely.

Pat had straightened and come to her feet. "Monte Kirk!"

The small lawyer made her a bow. "The same. Your surprise is gratifying, my dear. It's evident that you did not share Payne's suspicions."

She caught her breath. "You mean—you killed Ted Austin?"

He smiled, and the smile was worse than any sneer that I have ever seen. It made the flesh along my spine crawl.

"Yes," he said. "Austin was stupid, so he had to die. And this young man was stupid." He indicated me with a little movement of his gun. "So you two have to die also. He was so stupid back at the jail that he let me see he suspected me, that he was trying to trap me."

Pat tried to find her voice. Somehow, it wouldn't come, but her lips formed the words.

"What did he do?"

The little lawyer grinned, still coldly, without humor.

"Payne was careful for me to overhear him when he told you that he was coming out here. He wanted me to walk into a trap, didn't you, Payne? Well, I came, but you can stop watching the door. I've known for two weeks that some of the guards were in your pay, and I took care of them.

"The only mistake I made was in telling Ted Austin. I've been using him as a shield for my operations ever since the war started. He wasn't too bright, and he didn't suspect at first that I represented German money in the firm. By the time he did realize it, he was in too deep to pull out, but I shouldn't have told him who you are, or what you were here for. He lost his nerve. He was going to turn everything he could into cash and try for Mexico.

"That's why he sold the newspaper to Curtis' men. But I saw you going out to his ranch tonight." The man was talking to Pat now, although he never stopped watching me. "I knew," he went on, "that Austin would tell you the whole story if you taxed him with the paper sale. So I followed, and shot him through the window. I thought by so doing that I wouldn't have to shoot you, but this busybody has fixed things so I have no alternative."

I found when I tried to speak that my lips were dry, that it was hard to form words. "It will do you no good," I told him. "The game is up. You can't hide our bodies and get away with it."

"Did you ever see magnesium burn?" The thin lips again twisted in a little smile.

Pat shuddered. "No Monte, you don't mean it! You can't!"

"People die in war," he said. "You aren't very important, my dear, I—"

He never finished the sentence for there was noise outside the door and it burst open to expose Curtis and Blackie Drew. Evidently Hammond was still suffering from the rap I had taken at his head.

"There you are!" The fat man's words died in his throat as he saw the gun in the lawyer's hand. "What the blazes?"

I saw Kirk hesitate for a moment. "I'm taking care of some friends of yours," he said bluntly. "They're in my way as much as they are in yours. I wish you hadn't butted in. I'm about to have a small fire and—"

CURTIS was not dumb. I saw his eyes shift to the door which opened into the part of the building where the metal was stored and a frown wrinkled his fat face.

"But why? Why are they in your way?"

"He's a German!" I shouted. "I'm from the Alien Property office and—"

"What difference does that make to you?" Kirk demanded of the fat man. "You're a gambler. You're after money. I'll see that you get it, more than you ever dreamed of."

"It makes this difference!" I don't think that Curtis even realized that he was shouting. "I've got a boy. He's a machinist's mate on a carrier, you Nazi!"

He charged forward with all the grace of a lumbering steer.

Kirk shot him twice before I could cover the distance and knock up his arm.

He spun around to meet my attack and I made a grab for him, but failed to hold him. Some way he managed to wrench free, dropping his gun in the process and leaping through the door which led to the storage bins.

The door slammed and I heard him slide the bolt into place. It was iron, a fire door, and there wasn't a chance of breaking it down.

"Outside!" I shouted to Blackie who was staring down bewilderedly at his fallen chief. "Get him as he comes out the side."

Then I stooped, caught up Kirk's gun and bent over Curtis. The fat man was dead.

"Don, Kirk isn't trying to get away," Pat said. "He's still in there. I can hear him. He's setting the place on fire."

I didn't waste time. I seized the desk phone and turned in the alarm, then we dashed outside, falling over Jerry's body. Poor Jerry! Kirk had hit him from behind, and he was dead. I turned away as the plant's fire squad raced up. They were joined a few minutes later by the outfits

from town and the other plants, but they might as well have tried to put out a volcano. The steel and concrete building broke apart under the heat, showing the glow from the burning metal heart. There was no sign of Kirk. There never would be.

We turned away, driven back by the heat.

"What made you suspect him, Don?" Pat asked.

"It had to be him," I told her. "Someone shot at me outside of his office and he was the only one who knew I was in town. Then, too, he was your uncle's lawyer, trusted by him, and if your uncle had told anyone who I was, Kirk would be the most likely man. I went out to see your uncle before I left town, but he was too sick to talk.

"The thing that bothered me was Ted Austin's murder. It didn't fit in. I hadn't been able to connect him with the plant, and then I learned tonight that he served as voting trustee for some mysterious stockholder. I suspected both Kirk and Boyston, yet Boyston saved my life tonight. Therefore, my bets were on Kirk."

She nodded. The light from the burning building showed her face, it looked tired and strained.

"What now?" she asked.

"We'll have a talk with Dollar Hammond," I said. "The paper's in his name and he'll probably be willing to sell it back. I've a little dough and I think maybe I'd like a shot at newspaper running when this war is over. Would you take care of it until then?"

She smiled and turned to look at me.

"For you, I might," she admitted.

"For us," I said.

I always figured to put my property in my wife's name.

That is, when I got a wife.

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COMING NEXT MONTH

MURDER IN THE SKY

A Johnny Wells Mystery Novel

By G. WAYMAN JONES

•

A SHROUD FOR MR. HYDE

By BENTON BRADEN

The goober-eating gumshoe adds a dash of gunpowder to a boiling crime stew before serving plotters up to the law!

CHAPTER I

Vanishing Lady

WILLIE BRANN dropped the peanut that he had been on the point of devouring as the tall young man came into his private office at the Cole Agency. Maxey Gates, Willie's right-hand man and pal, who was sitting in a chair that was braced against the wall, lowered his newspaper and stared too. Normally the young man would not have been exactly homely. But now his face was pale, his eyes bloodshot and rolling a bit wildly.

"Brother, you look like a sailor that has had a bad night at sea," Maxey commented frankly.

The visitor did not take offense at that remark. He managed a wan smile.

"I guess you're right." He nodded. "I feel like a wreck, and probably look like one. Instead of a bad night I've had three of them. For three days and nights I've been the guest of the cops. They have a way with them, those cops. They never laid a finger on me—but they put the pressure on me. You're Willie Brann?"

"Nix," Maxey replied, as he wagged his finger at Willie. "That's Willie. I'm only his social secretary."

The young man turned his gaze upon Willie. He looked just a little disappointed. Willie Brann was not impressive on first inspection. He was short, round-faced, and plump, and the fact that he was eating peanuts like a small boy at a circus didn't make him a more imposing figure.

"What did the cops have against you?" Willie asked. "Or were they just trying to get some information out of you?"

"Both. But their main object was to try to make me admit that I had committed a murder. They seemed to be convinced that I killed my own wife. I expect most of the people who read the papers think I killed her. Even you may think so. You see, my name is Tom Painton."

Willie and Maxey looked at young Painton with renewed interest. The name answered a lot of questions. It had been smeared over front pages for the past week. Three months before Tom Painton, a penniless clerk, had created a mild sensation by marrying Alice Dole. Alice Dole was sole heiress to a considerable fortune and she ranked high in the Social Register. Everybody said that the marriage wouldn't last.

Naturally everybody said, "Ah, I knew something like that would happen," when just a week ago Tom Painton had appeared in the small village of Ridgeville and told a rather weird story to a deputy sheriff there.

TOM and Alice Painton had been spending a few days at a cottage on Long Lake near Ridgeville. Alice, so Painton reported, had done a vanishing act. His story was that he had been out on the lake fishing until sundown. By the time he got back to the cottage it was dark. His bride had not been waiting for him at the cottage. Tom couldn't give any explanation or even furnish the officers with a reasonable clue. His bride had just vanished and that was all there was to it.

"I guess you haven't had much sleep during the last three days," Willie said. "I know about how they worked on you. They kept you awake and shot the questions at you, hoping that they could wear your resistance down in the end. Did your lawyer finally force them to turn you loose, get you free on a writ?"

Tom Painton shook his head. "I didn't have any lawyer," he said doggedly. "I wasn't guilty and I figured that an innocent man doesn't need a lawyer."

"You're a guy that likes to do things the hard way," Maxey Gates said with a grimace. "A smart lawyer could have saved you a day or two of that torture."

"I know it," Tom Painton said. "But I wanted to convince the cops I was innocent.

A COMPLETE WILLIE BRANN NOVELET

Copp died as he was desperately trying to bring his gun upon Willie

I know that the story I told about my wife's disappearance sounds fishy. Alice married me when I didn't have a dime. She had a couple of million, at least. So I can understand why everybody jumps at conclusions and accuses me of murdering her so that I can get at some of her money. That's why I came to see you, Mr. Brann. I want you to prove that the people did jump at the wrong conclusions. I want you to prove that I didn't kill her.

"Most important of all, I want you to find out what happened to my wife. I know she loved me and she knew how much I loved her. So I know she didn't just walk out on me. I want to know what became of her. I've read about you, Mr. Brann, and I know that you are the one man that may be able to find out the truth."

"I want to ask you a few questions before I make any promises, Painton," Willie said crisply. "Now, as I understand it, you and Alice's cousin, Arthur Dole, inherit all of Alice's money."

"That probably is true in the long run," Painton said. "But there's more to it than that. Alice's father left a fortune of about two million to her in trust. Mr. James Hyde is the trustee. He manages the estate and pays Alice the income. That trust will run for seven years more."

"But Alice's death would end the trust, wouldn't it?"

"No. The trust runs for seven years more regardless of what happens to Alice. I suppose that if Alice is not found the income from the estate would eventually be paid to Arthur Dole and me. But I'll never touch a dime of that money until I have been proved innocent. I mean for my own benefit. I'll spend what I get in trying to find out what happened to Alice. For instance I'll agree to pay you any fee that you may charge."

"Then this cousin," Arthur Dole, had the same motive as you," Willie said. "He benefits to the same extent that you do in the estate. Did the cops suspect him?"

"They questioned him. Arthur was pretty nice to me. He defended me as well as himself. He told the cops that if either one of us had acted to get a share of the estate that we certainly would have arranged it so Alice's body could be found after we had killed her. He said that if her body wasn't found we might not be able to share in the estate for years. His lawyer told him it would be seven years before she would be presumed to be dead and we could come into the money. So Arthur argued that it was ridiculous to suspect either one of us. At least until Alice's body was found."

"That's pretty good reasoning," Willie Brann conceded. "But of course Alice's body may be found at any time. If she is dead. What is your idea about that, Painton? Do you think Alice is dead?"

Tom Painton sighed and said wearily. "I have no idea, Mr. Brann. I haven't the slightest idea what happened to her. That's just what I want you to find out."

"It looks like a tough case, Painton," Willie told him. "There was no clue of any kind found at the cottage when she disappeared?"

"No. She just disappeared in the clothes that she was wearing."

"Then we'll have to look in other directions. I'll make a preliminary investigation, Painton. If I can find a lead to start on I'll follow it up. But I can't promise anything definite in a case like this."

"I realize that, Mr. Brann. You just go to work on the case. Then I'll be better satisfied, no matter how it comes out."

"Painton may be smarter than he looks," Maxey Gates suggested to Willie after Painton had left. "Now supposin' he actually did kill her. Maybe he played it so he can turn up the body any time he wants to. In the meantime he has made the cops give up on him. He has put himself in a good position by not even getting a lawyer to go to bat for him. So since he has stymied the cops he'll think that you won't get anywhere either. So if you fall down on the job, then he'll just wait and let the body turn up later when all the heat is off. Then all he will have to do is sit back and collect."

"I don't agree with you on that, Maxey," Willie objected. "If Painton had wanted to kill her it would have been easy to have dumped her in that lake and come up with the story that she had drowned. He could have faked an accidental death in a dozen different ways. The same goes for that cousin, Arthur Dole. If Dole had killed her he certainly would have let the body be found at once, knowing that almost all suspicion would fall on Painton. And Painton said, before he left, that Dole is afraid he will be killed or disappear, too. Dole figures someone might be after him for the same reason that resulted in Alice's disappearance."

"Where are we goin' to start in on this job?" Maxey asked.

"We'll see that trustee first, Maxey. James Hyde. He can give us the low-down on the estate. And he might have an idea of his own for the motive behind the case."

MR. JAMES HYDE, trustee, was a busy man, or at least it seemed so to Willie and Maxey when they tried to get in touch with him. It wasn't until an hour after dark that they finally located him at his home, a two-story brick house on a quiet residental street. Hyde didn't show any great pleasure

when Willie introduced himself. But he finally shrugged and led them into his living room.

Hyde was a large man with thick iron-gray hair and heavy eyebrows. His manner was highly nervous.

"So Tom Painton employed you, did he?" Hyde asked abruptly. "And sent you to me to ask questions?"

"He hired me," Willie admitted. "But the questions are my own idea. I'd like to get a fresh start on this case. I know the police have exhausted routine methods. If there is a hidden motive for the disappearance of Alice Painton it seems to me that you are the most likely source of information. Now as I understand it Tom Painton and Arthur Dole, Alice's cousin, will, share the estate equally—if it develops that she is dead."

"They'd share the income of the estate," Hyde corrected quickly. "Alice's death doesn't terminate the trust. They wouldn't receive the principal of the estate for seven years."

"The principal might be worth waiting for," Willie said thoughtfully. "Particularly if they drew a nice income in the meantime."

"They won't get a cent of the income or principal either until they prove that Alice is dead," Hyde said sharply. "I'll fight both of them on that. I'm the trustee and I have the say-so. I can beat them in court if they try to force me. Until it is positively proved in court that Alice is dead that income will pile up for Alice's account."

"But Dole and Painton would have some rights," Willie observed. "Since they would get the money in the end they'd have the right to check on you, make you account strictly for the money you handle. I think they'd have the right to go into court right now and examine the affairs of the estate."

James Hyde started a little. "Are you insinuating that there is anything wrong with the affairs of the estate?" he asked harshly. "That I might be short in my accounts?"

"I'm not insinuating anything," Willie denied coolly. But he followed up quickly. "As a detective I'm looking for a motive for Alice Painton's disappearance. I'm going to consider all possibilities. I can't overlook the point that, if you *were* short in your accounts, you would have a motive yourself, Hyde. As the matter stands right now you benefit more than anyone else. You run the estate, you let the income pile up, you don't pay out a cent to anyone. And either Dole or Painton would have to go to court to make you account in any way."

Hyde didn't like it, didn't like it at all. He swallowed hard.

"I'm not short in my accounts," he said angrily. "I can account for every penny that has ever come into my hands. I get twelve thousand dollars a year for my services, no matter how things go."

"May I ask of what the estate consists?" Willie put. "Is there much real estate in the holdings?"

"None at all," Hyde replied. "I have kept everything invested in good stocks and bonds."

"There have been no unusual problems in the handling of the estate lately?"

"No!" Hyde declared emphatically.

Willie Brann smiled just a little. He took a peanut from his pocket, crushed it between his fingers, and ate the meats before he spoke again.

"I started looking for you this afternoon, Mr. Hyde," he said. "Had trouble finding you. I was in at the Third National where you do some business. I met an official in there I knew quite well. He told me, in confidence, that you had been in there earlier in the day. He said you had cashed in some bonds. He said that you acted rather nervous about it. And I noticed that you were nervous when I first saw you a while ago. Why were you cashing in bonds today, Mr. Hyde? Was there some extraordinary obligation that you had to meet? Or was it something else?"

CHAPTER II

Kidnap Demand

HYDE'S face went white. For a moment it looked as if he might collapse.

"Now I'll have to tell you," he almost moaned to Willie Brann. "You've forced me to tell you."

"Tell me what?" asked Willie.

"That I know that Alice Painton is not dead—that she is still alive. That's why I was raising cash on those bonds. I was doing it on specific instructions from her."

"You mean that she deliberately walked out on Tom Painton up there at the cottage on Long Lake? That she's been hiding out? And now wants you to raise cash?"

"That's not it!" Hyde interrupted. "She didn't deliberately walk out on Tom Painton. Alice was kidnaped! She's being held for a hundred thousand dollars' ransom. A hundred thousand in cash! That's why I was raising that money today."

"You didn't tell anyone you had heard from Alice?"

"Of course not!" Hyde almost shouted. "I didn't dare tell anyone. I was following my instructions to the letter, instructions that came straight from Alice. My instructions were to raise the cash and have it ready to deliver. I did that. I let my servants go for the day and night so that there could be no

possible interference on the part of anyone. I didn't intend to tell anyone—until you forced me."

"When did you hear from Alice, and how?" asked Willie.

"It was a phone call last night, right here in this room. A man was at the other end of the wire when I answered. When he was sure that I was James Hyde he put Alice on the phone. She said she was being held for one hundred thousand dollars and for me to raise the money at once."

"You're absolutely sure it was Alice Painton?" Willie asked.

"Sure?" Hyde countered. "Absolutely sure? How could I be? I thought it was Alice. It sounded like her voice. Enough to convince me, make me reasonably certain that it was Alice. I couldn't be absolutely sure unless I could see her as well as talk to her. No kidnapers would agree to anything like that. I had to make up my mind right then. I told Alice that I would raise the money and follow her instructions. I didn't dare do otherwise. I couldn't gamble with her life—not for any hundred thousand dollars. I had to take the risks involved."

"When are you to pay over this hundred thousand to the kidnapers?"

"I've already paid it." Hyde said stiffly.

"You've paid it!" Willie couldn't keep the astonishment out of his tone. "You've paid it, but Alice hasn't been released yet?"

"No. They didn't agree to release her at the exact moment I paid over the money. Remember I was doing exactly as Alice told me to do. She told me to be in Sherman Park with the money at dusk tonight. I was to walk down a certain path where a man would meet me. The man would take the money and tell me where to find her."

"You did that tonight?"

"Yes. I returned just a few minutes before you came. I walked down that path. A man met me and took the money."

"He told you where you would find Alice?"

"He did. There's a country schoolhouse a few miles outside the city limits. It's called the Bald Hill school. He told me to drive out there, time myself so that I would arrive at that schoolhouse at exactly nine o'clock. He said that Alice would either be there when I arrived or would appear there a few minutes later. Not later than ten minutes at the most. I've got to leave in a few minutes now."

"I'd like to go with you," Willie said quickly. "Now that you've already paid the money they couldn't have any objections to that. They wouldn't even know about it, for that matter."

Hyde hesitated a moment. "I guess it would be all right," he said then. "Just you alone, Mr. Brann, not the two of you. We'll leave right away. It's getting a little chilly out so I'll get a topcoat. Then we'll leave at once."

He left the room. Maxey looked at Willie and made significant motions with his hands. It was plain that Maxey Gates didn't believe a word of that kidnaping story. Maxey moved over near a window and was standing there when Hyde came back into the room.

"You go back to the office and wait for me," Willie instructed Maxey as he stowed a final goober away. "Mr. Hyde and I ought to be back in an hour or so. If Alice Painton is waiting for us at that schoolhouse we'll phone in so you can notify Tom Painton and Arthur Dole at once."

THEY went on out to the street. Maxey got in his car and drove off. Willie got into the other car that was parked at the curb. James Hyde took the wheel and drove. Hyde drove fast and hardly a word was said until they had passed out of the city and were well out into the country. Hyde turned left on to a narrow road.

"That schoolhouse is just three miles down this road," he said. "We can only hope that those kidnapers will keep their word and have Alice there."

"Kidnapers don't have the reputation of keeping their word." Willie said dryly. "They got that hundred thousand from you easily. They might reason that they could force you to raise another hundred thousand just as easily."

"They'll get fooled if they try that," Hyde said. "I didn't dare refuse to pay off this first time. Suppose I had refused and they had murdered Alice? Everybody would blame me. But if they doublecross me it will be different. I'll refuse to deal again without iron-clad guarantees that Alice will be delivered."

A few minutes later Hyde turned off the road. The vague shape of a square building loomed before them. The little cupola on top marked it as a country schoolhouse. Hyde drove close to the building and parked.

"We'll just wait here a few minutes," he said tensely. "That's what Alice said I should do."

They waited five minutes. Alice Painton didn't appear. There was no sound or movement in that dark space that surrounded the building.

"There's no use waiting here longer," Willie said. "Let's get out and search the grounds. They might have left her tied up somewhere."

They searched that school yard foot by foot. Later Willie Brann walked about and called out at the top of his voice. There was no response.

"They've crossed me," Hyde said bitterly at last. "They took the money but didn't keep

their word to turn her loose. Still I feel, under all the circumstances, that I did the only thing I could do. But I'll not be tricked again. If they let Alice talk to me again I'll tell her that I won't deliver another cent to them unless she is turned over to me at the same time."

They drove back to the city in silence. Hyde announced he was going straight home. Willie got off at a convenient corner and took a taxi to the Cole Agency. Maxey Gates was waiting for him there. Maxey pointed to the big package on Willie's desk and grinned.

"It was a cinch," Maxey said. "After you and Hyde left I sneaked back to that window I had unlatched while Hyde was getting his topcoat. I went right to work, frisking the house. I figured that if Hyde was lying about Alice Painton he'd have that dough hidden in his own bedroom.

"I was right. He hadn't expected any interference tonight so he had taken the dough home and put it in a suitcase. It was on a shelf in his closet. I took the dough out and filled the suitcase with magazines and stuff so it would feel about the same if he lifts it. He won't tumble unless he opens the suitcase again. There's the hundred grand on the desk. In cash. What you goin' to do with it?"

"We'll put it in the safe for the present," Willie decided. "Now I'll run out to Arthur Dole's apartment. It's a bit late but he will probably be up."

Arthur Dole was up. He didn't seem pleased at receiving visitors. And Willie sensed, after a few seconds, that Arthur Dole was a badly frightened young man. He was a slight fellow with blond hair and a narrow face that showed weakness. His pale blue eyes were shifty.

Dole was not alone. There was another man with him in his living room, a square-shouldered man of about thirty who sat in an easy chair. There was nothing like fear in his impassive face. His gray eyes were cold and challenging.

"I know who you are," Arthur Dole said jerkily. "Tom Painton told me he had employed you. This—" he flipped his thumb at his companion—"is my bodyguard, Copp."

"You're expecting trouble?" Willie asked in a mild tone.

"I'm just playing safe," Dole said nervously. "Alice was my cousin. She's disappeared, vanished into thin air. That leaves me the only living member of the Dole clan. How do I know that the parties who worked on Alice won't come after me? I'm taking no chances."

"You think Tom Painton is in danger, too?" Willie asked.

"I don't know. He's not of the blood. And how do I know what's behind all this? Painton might be himself—although I don't think he is. But if he is, if Painton disposed of Alice to get at the Dole money, he might decide to do a good job of it and take care of me, too. Right now I'm not giving anybody a chance to get at me. But I've no reason whatever to suspect Painton, other than the fact that he was up there alone with Alice when she disappeared. But it seems to me that if he had killed her, he'd have arranged to have let the body be found so that he could immediately share with me in the income from that estate."

"From that point of view you had practically the same motive as Painton," Willie suggested with a faint smile. "You and Painton would share almost alike in the event of Alice Painton's death."

COPP broke in, in a flat harsh voice. "Now, look here!" he said. "Dole hired me to see that he wasn't pushed around. He's already talked to the cops and they give him a clean bill. So don't you come in here with the idea that you got a right to grill Dole. You ain't goin' to push him around while I'm on the job."

Willie Brann shrugged as he took a peanut from his pocket and crushed it in his fingers. He transferred the meats to his mouth. He flipped the shell, apparently aiming at a vase that stood in a corner. But the shell took a perverse course and went straight for Copp's head. Copp ducked it.

"You got a crust," he said indignantly. "Throwin' them shells on a nice carpet like this. Ain't you been taught no manners?"

Willie didn't seem to hear as he concentrated on another goober.

"Copp—Copp," he mumbled to himself. "I don't seem to remember the name. You got Copp from an agency, Dole? He's a regular bodyguard?"

"Nah, I ain't," Copp said quickly. "Dole just happened to know me, know that I was on the up and up and he could depend on me. So he called me up and asked me to watch out for him for a few days. And that's what I'm goin' to do. There ain't nobody goin' to push Arty Dole around as long as I'm on the job."

"I see," Willie Brann acknowledged as he flipped a peanut shell in the direction of the vase.

But again the shell went wild and again Copp had to duck. Copp's face reddened with anger.

"Now, look here, you little wart!" he howled. "There ain't nobody can push me around. If I thought you done that on purpose I'd smack you so hard you'd—"

"Charley!" Arthur Dole interrupted him sharply. "He wasn't aiming those shells at

you at all. Here!" He got the vase and put it on the table beside Willie Brann. "You can drop your shells in it now. Now it's getting late, Mr. Brann, and I'm tired, but since you're working for Tom Painton I want to help you in any way that I can. Was there anything you particularly wanted to ask me?"

"Yes, Mr. Dole. I'm trying to get at the real motive for Alice Painton's disappearance. Now what is your opinion of Mr. James Hyde, the trustee?"

"I don't like him, Mr. Brann. I'll admit that frankly. But on the other hand I don't see how he could profit by Alice's disappearance. He is trustee of the estate for seven years yet, no matter what happens. He draws down a straight salary. I don't see how he could be involved."

"Suppose he was short in his accounts," Willie suggested. "Suppose he had speculated with funds of the estate, and lost. Isn't there a chance that—"

"I hadn't thought of that!" Arthur Dole cried. "That may be the answer. I know he has broad powers under the terms of the trusteeship. If he were short he might decide that his only way out was to get rid of Alice. And me, too. And maybe Tom Painton, if Painton tried to make him account. I'll find out about this right away. I'll have my lawyer go right into court and get orders to make Hyde account for every dollar. We'll do it tomorrow! If Hyde has pulled anything like that, we'll find out the truth at once."

"You don't need to worry any, Arty," Charley Copp said. "That Hyde won't get no chance to pull a vanishin' act on you as long as I'm around."

"You see your lawyer in the morning," Willie advised Dole. "It will be better for you to demand an accounting than for Tom Painton to do it. I think you will find that James Hyde has a shortage."

"The dirty crook," Charley Copp exclaimed. "We'll sure put him behind the bars if we find he's gone south with any of Artie's dough."

"Then I'll just mark time until you check up on him," Willie said. "If Hyde is behind this thing the accounting will probably turn up an additional motive for Alice's disappearance."

Willie Brann politely picked up the vase and put it over in the corner where it had originally stood. He went back to the table and turned a little as though he were about to leave. Casually he crunched another peanut. He took the shell and flipped it—straight at Copp.

Copp ducked. But the shell went wild again. It rattled as it fell in the vase in the corner. Copp looked at the vase, frowned and bared his teeth at Willie.

"Good night," Willie said pleasantly, as he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER III

Murder Try

WHEN Willie Brann and Maxey Gates left their apartment the next morning they went down the street to a little cafe where they often ate breakfast. They were drinking their coffee when Maxey, who was facing the entrance door, frowned a little and said:

"Willie, I think we're going to have company."

Willie looked. Lieutenant of Detectives Deneen was coming in. They had bumped into Lieutenant Deneen in many of their cases. Deneen was pretty smart. He came right on to their table.

"What a surprise!" Maxey said, rolling his eyes. "Imagine seein' you here, Lieutenant. Sit right down and have a cup of java with us."

"I'll just do that," Deneen said in his quiet voice. "Haven't seen you boys for quite a while. Nice to meet you again."

"Can we depend on that?" Maxey asked. "You mean you just happened to drop in here by accident?"

"To be perfectly truthful, I didn't," Deneen admitted with something like a sigh. "I went up to your apartment first. No one answered. I knew you sometimes ate breakfast here. So I came on down here."

"You were making purely a social call, I suppose," Willie chuckled.

"Not exactly, Willie. I understand you're employed by Tom Painton."

"That's right, Deneen."

"Have you uncovered any startling evidence yet?"

"I can't say that I have," Willie replied cautiously. "What's your angle, Deneen? Why were you looking for us?"

"A small angle, Willie," Deneen said, matter-of-factly. "I just wondered if you would mind answering a few unimportant questions about the kill."

Willie and Maxey blinked at that. "You're a bit ahead of us there, Deneen," Willie said. "You don't mean that Alice Painton has been found!"

"No. Not that. It was a gentleman who suddenly departed this life. The body was found this morning. The set-up, at first glance, suggested a suicide. But there were some small items, such as the position of the body, that made us suspicious. On close inspection of the murder scene we discovered some really revealing clues. You were care-

less, Willie. Leaving those peanut shells on the floor."

"Hyde!" Willie exclaimed. "James Hyde!"

"Can I take that as a confession, Willie?"

"You know Willie better than that," Maxey said. "If he had been around there after Hyde was dead you'd never have found no goober shells on the floor."

"Right," Deneen conceded. "Therefore I can deduce without fear of contradiction that Willie was in the living room of the Hyde residence before Hyde was killed. You can go on from there, Willie. You should be able to save me a lot of mental effort in the case."

"But I can't, Deneen," Willie told him. "I called on Hyde last night, after Tom Painton had employed me. I wanted to find out all about the estate of Alice Painton that I could. But this murder is a complete surprise to me. It was the last thing I expected. I had half a hunch that James Hyde was responsible for the disappearance of Alice. I'm pretty sure that Hyde was short in his accounts. I can't even make a guess as to who might have killed Hyde."

"That makes it tough," Deneen said slowly. "I'm fairly sure that Hyde did not commit suicide."

"Let it ride for a suicide for a while," Willie said. "Let the killer think he got away with it. Then he may get overconfident and make a break."

"You sure you didn't have any idea that Hyde might be killed?" Deneen said narrowly. "You sure you aren't holding out on me?"

"The only thing we're holding out is a hundred thousand dollars," Willie said, and smiled.

Deneen looked as though he were missing the point of a joke. Willie told him what had happened, of the fake kidnaping that Hyde had promoted. Deneen agreed that that also should be kept under cover for the time being.

"The case has me completely confused," Deneen said finally. "Hyde is dead, so it is extremely unlikely that he had anything to do with the disappearance of Alice Painton. It's hard to believe that either Tom Painton or Arthur Hale had anything to do with it as long as her body remains hidden. They can't collect either principal or income from that estate until she has been proved to be dead, or a number of years have elapsed. I've never met a killer yet that was any too patient. There must be somebody else in the background who is pulling the strings. They're bound to show their hands sooner or later."

Willie and Maxey parted from Deneen when they left the cafe and went on to the Cole Agency. They had been in Willie's private office about fifteen minutes when Tom Painton walked in. Painton's manner was furtive.

"What's the matter, Painton?" Willie inquired. "You act as though you're afraid someone might have seen you come in here."

"That's exactly what I am afraid of," Painton said hoarsely.

"Why? What difference does it make?"

"I'm violating my orders when I come here," Painton said mysteriously. "I'm not supposed to. In fact I've been warned not to consult anybody."

"Consult anybody about what?"

"About—about the pay-off," Painton almost whispered. "You see, I've heard from Alice. She was kidnaped, when she disappeared at the cottage."

WILLIE and Maxey stared. This was the second time within twenty-four hours they had heard this same story and Tom Painton's version sounded as phony as James Hyde's story had sounded. Willie Brann had already convinced himself that Alice Painton's disappearance was no part of a simple snatch scheme. The disgust on Maxey Gates' face showed plainly that he didn't believe a word of it.

"And now the kidnapers have contacted you?" Willie asked.

"That's right." Painton nodded. "I heard from them this morning."

"How much do they want?"

"One hundred thousand dollars."

Maxey shut his eyes and winced a little.

"How did they contact you?" asked Willie.

"I got a letter in the mail. It gave me complete instructions how to proceed. I'm to go to the bank where Alice does business and show them the letter. The bank is supposed to advance the hundred thousand when they're convinced the demand is an authentic one, that these men really have Alice and are holding her for ransom."

"A bank may be hard to convince," Willie said.

"I don't think so," Painton said. "Not when they see the note that Alice put in. Anybody who knows her handwriting will know she wrote that note."

"Can I see the note?"

"Sure," Painton said eagerly. "I was warned not to go anywhere but to the bank, but I made up my mind not to do anything without your approval, Mr. Brann. Here's what I received."

Willie took the letter from Painton and removed two sheets of paper from it. One of them was printed in pen and ink and read:

Painton:

We've got your wife. You can have her back for one hundred thousand dollars. Alice says you can raise this money by going to her bank and

showing them the note she has enclosed for you. Get the money first. Consult no one but the president of that bank and warn him not to talk. You should receive this tomorrow—Wednesday morning. At nine o'clock Wednesday night drive slowly out on Vinson Street, starting from the University. Come alone. Have the money in a bag. At a certain point on Vinson Street a car will pull alongside you. Pull over to the curb and stop then. We will have your wife in the car with us. We will trade you your wife for the money. If you do not follow orders in every detail your wife will be killed at once. We enclose a note from your wife to prove that we are not faking.

Willie Brann took the other sheet. It was written in a feminine hand and Willie knew that writing would be difficult to fake. He read:

Dearest Tom:

Do exactly as they tell you in the letter. My life depends on it. I am well and have been treated fine. But I am anxious to be freed and come back to you, so raise the money and bring it out on Vinson Street as they tell you to. Show this note to Mr. Ellsworth, president of my bank. He can verify my handwriting with you. Don't fail me, Tom. I will be killed if you do not follow instructions.

All my love,
Alice

"What do you think of this handwriting, Painton?" Willie asked.

"It's Alice's writing, beyond any shadow of a doubt," Painton replied emphatically. "Somebody's got her. I've got to raise the money."

"No, you don't," Willie said forcefully. "All you've got to do is make the men who meet you on Vinson Street think you have the money. I know for sure now, Painton, that there is far more to this than a simple kidnaping. It won't do you any good to have the money—because those men won't have your wife with them. They'll take your dough, and kill her anyway in the end. But you go on over to the bank and show Mr. Ellsworth this note. Have you a sedan?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"It's in our garage—that is, Alice's garage. At her home in Edgewood."

"Have Mr. Ellsworth fix up a fake package for you that will appear to be the currency," Willie said. "Tonight take that package and get your sedan out of the garage just in time to make Vinson Street at the appointed time. That way, anyone watching you will conclude that you are going it alone. But I will be in that sedan."

"But," Painton objected miserably. "I'm afraid that if I don't pay them they'll kill Alice!"

"Listen!" Maxey Gates roared. "You come up here and hired Willie Brann because you thought he was the smartest dick in the city, didn't you? Well, you were right. He is. Now are you goin' to take a hundred grand out there, turn it over to those punks, and get your wife killed anyway? Or are you goin' to do as Willie says and have a chance to save her?"

"I'll do as he says," Tom Painton agreed meekly.

Willie Brann got Mr. Ellsworth, the banker, on the phone right after Painton left the office. It was an hour later when Ellsworth called back.

"That note was written by Alice Painton," the banker informed Willie. "No question about it. I am familiar with her writing myself and we have several samples of it here. I called in Milton who passes on questionable signatures for us and he said it was Alice's writing. We fixed up a package for Painton. I hope things work out right for you, Mr. Brann."

"It must be on the level then," Maxey Gates said, wide-eyed. "I guess Painton is on the level. But I sure thought he was pullin' a fast one on us when he came in here with the same song and dance that Hyde had used. Now what's goin' to happen when you meet those punks on Vinson Street."

"It will be their move," Willie said shortly. "I hope they make it a good one so we can break the case fast. . . ."

IT WAS just eight-thirty when Tom Painton drove the sedan from the garage and rolled out along the driveway to the street. Willie Brann was sitting on the floorboards in the rear. All he could see was an occasional street light that flashed by.

"Watch your mirror," Willie told Painton. "Try to see if we're being trailed. These lads might move in on us before we get to Vinson Street."

But they didn't. They reached the University without incident and Tom Painton drove slowly north on Vinson. After a mile they were driving along a quiet, elm-lined street that was only dimly lighted by infrequent lamps.

"There's a car coming up behind us," said Tom Painton unsteadily. "This must be it."

Willie raised his head a little, saw the car as it came alongside. It was a sedan and it was no more than a vague shape in that darkened part of the street. A voice called out an order and Tom Painton slowed and stopped. The sedan on the left stopped squarely abreast.

"You're Painton?" That voice came from a man whose face appeared only as a white blob from the front seat of that sedan.

"Yes, I'm Painton."

"You've got the money with you?"

"Yes."

"Hand it out through the window so I can take it."

"You—you've got Alice with you?"

"Sure. She's in the back seat. Alone. I had to tie her hands and gag her to play safe. But when you hand me the money I'll open the rear door and she can step out to the pavement. Then after I leave you can untie her and take her in your car. Now—hand over that dough!"

Tom Painton lifted the package from the seat beside him and passed it through the window. Eager hands reached out from the sedan and seized it.

"Okay," the voice said as the package disappeared. "Here's your wife. Right in your lap!"

Willie Brann saw the object that came hurtling through the air. It swished past Tom Painton's face and landed on the seat beside him. Willie was over the back of the front seat and grappling for it in a second. His hands touched metal. He caught hold of it and hurled it back out through the window.

The sedan opposite them was already beginning to move.

"Get going, Painton!" Willie yelled. "After him!"

Painton shot the car forward. It hadn't gone ten feet until there was a terrific explosion behind them. That grenade or bomb had exploded on the pavement as it rolled. The driver of that car had had a double objective. One was to collect that hundred grand and the other was to kill Tom Painton, and Willie had a hunch that the latter was more important than the money to the killer.

Willie leaned out of the window on his left with a gun in his hand. The car ahead was not more than twenty-five feet ahead. Willie shot slowly, planting every shot where he wanted it.

The cars were picking up speed fast. The sedan ahead began to swerve. After Willie's last shot the driver seemed to lose control of it. It headed across the street, bounced up over the sidewalk, smashed head on into the trunk of a big elm tree.

That stopped it cold.

CHAPTER IV

Gun Challenge

BRANN and Tom Painton looked at the wreck a minute later. The man at the wheel of the wrecked sedan was dead. Willie searched the car and the man quickly. There was only one thing that he thought worthy of attention. It was the half of a blue ticket, such as a ticket seller tears off a roll in the box office of a movie house. Before Willie had finished Tom Painton came back from the house where Willie had sent him to phone for Lieutenant Deneen.

Deneen got there quickly. When he used his flashlight on the face of the dead driver of the sedan he nodded.

"A tough lad by the name of Mangum," he said. "Lippy Mangum, they call him. A long police record, but he's no leader. Was he alone in the car?"

"I think so," Willie answered. "It was so dark we couldn't see into the interior of the car when it stopped. But we didn't see anyone else get out of it, either when it was moving or after it smashed up. Let's check on this Mangum and see who he runs with."

Maxey Gates drew the job of running down that theater ticket. It was identified the next afternoon at the Green Avenue Theater. The girl at the box-office said that the color and the number showed that it had been sold two days before. The Green Avenue Theater was far out on the north side. It wasn't a thickly populated part of the city.

Maxey began a systematic canvass of the restaurants in that vicinity. On his sixteenth call, at a rather large cafe located about half a mile from the theater, the cashier nodded when she looked at the two pictures that Maxey held out for her inspection.

"Yes," she said. "I know the faces of those men. I've seen them in here."

"Old customers?"

"No. I don't believe they've been eating in here for more than a week. And then not regularly. And not always together. I'd say that they have been in here four or five times."

At the dinner hour Maxey stationed himself near the door that led from the kitchen into the dining room. He stood there for an hour and a half before he got the signal from the cashier. She indicated the single customer who walked over and sat down at a table near the wall. Maxey went out the rear door of the kitchen. He moved around to the front of the cafe and took up a position across the street from it.

The front of the brick building was unimpressive and there was no sign to indicate the nature of the business within. Willie Brann opened the door, went through a short hall, opened another door and stepped into a bar. There were half a dozen tables lined against the wall opposite the bar.

Willie stood there for a moment, then walked the length of the room toward a door at the rear. The door opened just before he reached it. The man who came out was tall, slender, well-dressed. There were streaks of white in his hair and his face showed the tense lines of a gambler.

"Why, hello, Brann," Duke Elston, owner

of the gambling place said, and grinned. "Don't tell me you want to go up and buck one of my crap tables?"

"No, Duke. I just want to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure," Duke said affably. "Let's sit down at a table. Have a drink on the house."

They sat down. Duke Elston waited, still smiling.

"I guess you've read about this Painton case," Willie said.

"Sure. Who hasn't? You working on it, Brann?"

"That's it, Duke. I think I'm going to break it wide open in a few hours. Now a lad by the name of Lippy Mangum was killed last night. He was in on the Alice Painton job. You know anything about him?"

"A little, Brann. He worked for me a while."

"What did he do for you?"

"Guard. You know a place like this always has to watch out for a stick-up. We have to have at least one man around who knows how to use a gat. Mangum had a small rep for that so I figured no one would try to take the place when he was standing around."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"No. Not for three or four months. I don't know what he has been doing since he quit me."

"It doesn't make much difference about him, Duke. He's dead. It's another man I'm really interested in. When we checked on Mangum we found out he was a pal of a lad name Charley Copp. Now Copp is still very much alive and I'd like to get my hands on him."

Duke Elston shook his head. "Sorry, Brann. I can't help you there. I never heard of any fellow by the name of Copp. You need him to break the case? You think he'd be able to tell what happened to Alice Painton?"

"I know what happened to Alice Painton," Willie said. "If everything breaks right I'll have her in six hours. I'm getting ready to pull all the strings right now and blow the case wide open. It would just simplify things a little if I could land this Charley Copp first. But it will all be the same in the end."

"The way I figured it, from what I read in the papers," Duke Elston said, "I thought this Alice Painton was dead. You think she is still alive?"

"Yes, I do," Willie said with emphasis. "You read the papers in the morning and you'll find out I'm right. I've got a hot lead. I'll find her within six hours. I was just hoping that I could get a lead from you through Mangum that would take me to Copp. But he's probably scared by this time and under cover anyway."

"I knew Mangum all right," Duke said. "But I don't think I ever heard him mention this Copp."

"Thanks just the same, Duke," Willie said as he got up. "I'll have to roll along. I've got a lot of ground to cover in the next few hours. . . ."

Willie Brann and Maxey Gates lay out on the ground and looked through the darkness at the two-story structure that was barely outlined against the sky. It was a frame house of perhaps ten rooms. Willie and Maxey were in the back yard, about forty feet from the kitchen porch.

The exterior of the house was not unguarded. There was a man on duty and he walked around the house every few minutes, keeping close to the walls where his shadowy figure could hardly be seen. They saw him come around the rear of the house, then turn the opposite corner and go back toward the front.

Willie got up and moved forward to the side of the kitchen porch. He flattened himself against the side of the porch and waited It was five minutes before he heard the soft crunch of feet. A moment later the figure of a man loomed in front of him. Willie struck down with the gun in his right hand. The man crumbled to the ground without a sound. Willie stooped and searched him. His hand came up with two keys.

One of those keys, he found out a minute later, unlocked the back door. Willie Brann opened that door, stepped into the blackness of the kitchen and closed the door behind him. He stood there and listened, but heard nothing. Using a small flashlight, he spotted a door at his right. He opened it. There was a small hall and a stairway there. Willie went up the stairway.

He found the room from which the murmur of voices came. Just a little light showed beneath the door. Willie moved close to the door and listened.

"We've got to move!" a voice was insisting. "We haven't got a minute to waste."

"You're crazy," Copp's flat voice was sneering. "It's all a bluff. How could Brann locate this place? You say you're sure he didn't tail you here? You're sure no one tailed you?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that. But how do we know that Mangum died instantly. He might have squawked before he died?"

"Mangum didn't squawk!" Copp denied angrily. "He was my pal. No cop could make him squawk. No matter what they did to him. You've just got the jitters. Besides, we've got no place else to go. We can't drag the dame around in a car for long. We got to have a place to light with her."

"We've got to get rid of her," the other man said in a panic. "I tell you Brann isn't bluffing. And even if he is, we don't dare

take chances. We've got to get rid of her, plant her somewhere where she'll never be found."

"We'd be planting a million bucks. Me? I'm not tossing off any dough like that without a fight. We keep the dame alive. If you've got to move her out of this place—okay. But I ain't goin' to throw away a million on no false alarm."

"Then let's get out of here—get out at once. We'll take her in the car. I know a shack out in the country where we can take her, until we find a better place. You go get her, Copp. We'll get out of here right away. There's not a minute to lose."

Willie Brann had his hand on the doorknob. He turned it and threw the door wide open. The two men whirled and faced him.

"You see?" Duke Elston moaned. "I was right! I was right!"

"Yes, you were right," Willie told him. "We had this house located before I came to see you. I reasoned that you were the brains behind this job, Duke. So I forced you. I figured you would come out here in a hurry if you thought I would break the case in a few hours and find Alice Painton. I couldn't prove anything on you. I wanted you here. I got here ahead of you and waited, saw you come in here not half an hour ago."

Duke Elston took two steps backward until his hand rested on a small table. Willie saw wires leading down to the floor from that table. The wires ran around the edge of the room and disappeared beneath another door.

"It was apparent from the first that Alice Painton wasn't dead," Willie said. "If either Painton or Arthur Dole had killed her she'd have been found dead so they, at least, could have collected the income from the trust. That told me that someone else was behind the play, someone who was a bit smarter than Arthur Dole. I checked Dole, though. I found that he had raised around ten thousand in cash about two weeks ago. I also found out that he had frequented your gaming tables, Duke. He got acquainted with you and Copp and Mangum.

"Maybe he lost money to you and couldn't pay. Maybe he just bellyached about being hard up. Anyway, you showed him a nice easy way to get in the money. You pointed out to him that Alice Painton was the only obstacle to his prosperity. Dole paid you that ten grand to kill Alice—and leave her body where it could be found."

"He's a mind reader." Copp sneered.

"But you weren't doing the job for a measly ten grand," Willie went on. "You knew your big play was to keep Alice alive. No wonder the weakling, Arthur Dole, was nervous and scared. He was just tumbling to the fix he was in. And you Copp, were with him, not as a bodyguard, but to keep him in line and see that he didn't make any breaks to strangers. You talked Dole into paying you ten grand for a simple murder. But your real plan was to kill James Hyde, the trustee, and Tom Painton. Then Dole, as the only living interested party, could get himself appointed trustee and comply with the legal terms of the trust. There'd be no one left to check on him.

"Over the years you could make him pay you any amount—as long as you kept Alice alive. But you didn't want to wait years for the full pay-off. So you figured you could collect a hundred grand from Tom Painton at the same time you got rid of him. That hundred grand would keep you in velvet until you could get time to work on the two-million-dollar estate with Arthur Dole. Only it didn't work out that way.

"Hyde had big ideas, too. He thought Alice was dead. He was short a hundred thousand. He got the snatch idea, too, as an easy way to get the money to cover up his shortage. He didn't dream that he was marked for death. But he was the only one who died on schedule. Your scheme didn't pan out. You're still two murders short. Two murders short—and you are through. For only ten grand that you won't live to spend."

DUKE ELSTON's face was as unexpressive as a poker player with all his chips in the pot. "Not quite through Brann," he said. "We've still got Alice Painton."

"The cops have got Arthur Dole, too," Willie said. "He's a weakling. He'll wind up by laying it all on you and trying to save himself."

"You think you're all set to polish us off, don't you, Brann?" Duke Elston said quickly. "I know how fast you are with your gats. But you won't be fast enough now. I made up my mind from the first that no one would ever catch us with Alice Painton—and get her alive. You see these wires that run down from this table? You know where they go? They run to the bed where Alice Painton is lying. You know what's beneath that bed, Brann? There's enough dynamite to blow out that whole side of the house. Wired and ready to go up.

"All I've got to do is press this button, and you can't draw fast enough to prevent me. It will be some blast, Brann. Maybe the whole house will go. I'm not sure. But it's a chance for us. Maybe we'll be able to get out while you're lying here, stunned. The lights will all go. And there won't be anything left of the girl for the cops to identify. So you see, we've got a chance."

"You expect me to fall for that threat and let you walk out of here?" Willie asked.

"You haven't got much choice, Brann. You don't dare reach for a gun. I can beat you to

it, press this button before you can show metal. You don't dare draw. I think ahead, Brann. I'm a man who wants to live as long as he can."

WILLIE BRANN'S right hand moved. Moved slowly.

"Don't do it, Brann!" Duke shouted frantically. "I'll blow us all to eternity!"

Willie's hand moved faster and Duke snapped his finger down on the button. He pressed it down hard again—but nothing happened.

"Alice Painton is on her way back to her husband," Willie said easily. "I've been in the house a little longer than you think. I found her, disconnected the wires you fixed so painstakingly in that room. Maxey Gates took her out of the house as I came on to this room."

Willie hadn't drawn a gun. His hand had dropped carelessly back to his side.

"Just how fast are you with your guns, Brann?" Copp spoke and his tone was desperate. "I think we'll find out now. I've heard a lot of stories about you. But I know you're no magician. You're just another who's fast with your guns. Well, I'm fast, too. I been in the business a long time. Come on, Duke. We've got him two to one. We can outgun him."

"Sure we can, Copp!" Duke Elston said. "One of us can surely drop him before he gets both of us. You ready? Let's *go!*"

Copp was ready for that command. His right hand streaked for his left shoulder holster and his hand was fast. Copp didn't lose his nerve when he saw that his hand wasn't moving as fast as Willie's. He didn't shoot wildly. He didn't fire at all. He died as he was desperately trying to bring his gun on Willie and get in one true shot at Willie's heart. Copp went down, his gun still in his hand.

Duke Elston stood with his hands high in the air and looked down at Copp.

"Well, I let the sucker try his luck, Brann," Duke said dryly. "I thought he had an outside chance to beat you to it. But he was too slow. You can come over and get my gat now, Brann. I'm still a man who wants to live as long as he can."

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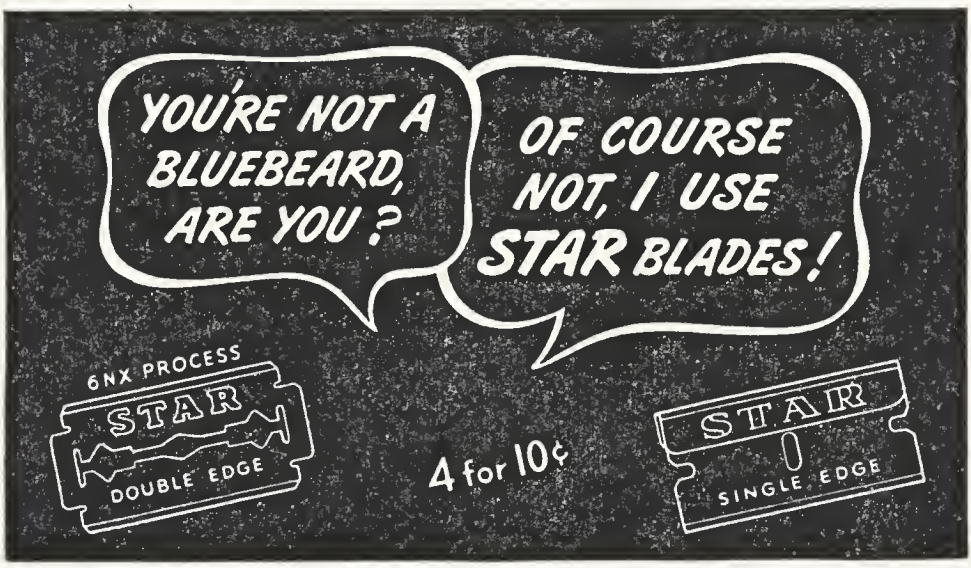

Clancy had only a fleeting glimpse of the man's hand

SALMON FOR SATAN

By HAL K. WELLS

By using a sinister fiery-eyed feline to solve a mystery, Patrolman Clancy proves black cats are unlucky—for killers!

BEYOND the glow of the streetlights along Barton Street's unlovely length, the night was dark with the blackness of the first hour after midnight. The cheery whistle died upon the lips of Patrolman Michael J. Clancy as he turned the corner to start the second half of his nightly prowl.

Clancy had a grim and deadly premonition. Somewhere in those darkly deserted blocks ahead of him, Satan would be waiting for him tonight. The thought sent the reddish-gray hairs on the back of Clancy's broad, sun-burned neck bristling eerily erect.

It was not that Patrolman Clancy was lacking in the matter of courage. If it had been merely a few gunsels lurking in the shadows of Barton Street, Mike would have barged cheerfully into battle with his blue eyes blazing, his night-stick lustily swinging, and his Police Positive spitting lead—if he remembered to draw it, which he seldom did in moments of emergency.

Satan, however, was a menace of another and quite different color. You can't use a

night-stick on a banshee, and .38 calibre slugs are of little value against a leprechaun. Satan was one-third banshee, one-third leprechaun, and four-thirds devil—and if you said that those figures seemed to add up to a slightly incredible total, Clancy would tell you that you simply didn't know your Irish arithmetic.

Most of the human inhabitants of Barton Street had gone to bed for the night. The ground-floor business places were closed, and the windows of the upstairs flats were dark. The only sign of life that Patrolman Clancy could see was Joe's Place, halfway up the block.

For a moment, Clancy's thoughts flirted wistfully with the idea of dropping into Joe's for a hamburger on rye. Then he reluctantly dismissed the idea. There was a certain night-prowling sergeant who had a quite unreasonable prejudice against patrolmen being parked on restaurant stools when they were supposed to be pounding their beats.

Clancy squared his broad shoulders and barged grimly on up the street. The first block passed without incident. Clancy's drooping spirits started to revive. Maybe, after all, Satan was prowling elsewhere tonight. Or maybe—oh, happy thought!—some benevolent truck or street-car had obliterated the ebony menace for all time.

Then, midway of the second block, hope died abruptly in Clancy's chest. The shadows of a narrow alley moved and a large piece of blackness disengaged itself and emerged upon the sidewalk. Two fiery eyes blazed at Clancy in baleful malignance while a huge bristling tail swung from side to side in taut belligerence.

WHOEVER had originally named the brute Satan had been a good judge of cat-flesh. It was big enough to lick any four dogs in the neighborhood, and frequently did. In the matter of general disposition, it was seventeen degrees meaner than a grizzly bear that has just sat down on a hornet's nest.

If Satan ever had an owner, his identity was lost somewhere in the mists of antiquity. Ever since Clancy had landed in the precinct the big black brute had roamed the alley strictly on its own—gaunt, battle-scarred and perpetually hungry, but never relaxing the grim and bitter hatred that it held for all mankind in general, and for Irish patrolmen in particular.

To Clancy's vividly superstitious soul, it was bad enough to have any black cat cross his path. When Satan did the crossing, it was seven times worse. Every time that happened, Catastrophe with a large and capital "Cat" promptly descended upon the luckless shoulders of Michael J. Clancy.

Clancy faced the big cat and raised his night-stick in what he knew would be a quite futile gesture.

"Begone, ye imp of the outer darkness!" he ordered. "Scram, ye owl-eyed divil of bad luck! Scat!"

Satan's lips writhed back from a set of teeth that would have looked good on a jaguar. From somewhere deep in his furry throat there came a snarling wail that was an open invitation to battle on any terms and with any weapons.

Clancy warily shuffled forward. Getting past Satan was a feat that he had never accomplished yet, but maybe this was his lucky night. It wasn't. Satan waited until the last possible second. Then he went into action with the flashing speed of black lightning.

He not only crossed Clancy's path—he crisscrossed it, circling Clancy's burly figure in a speed-blurred arc of yowling black fur and blazing yellow eyes. Clancy raised his night-stick but before he could throw it, Satan was gone, fading back into the alley from which he had come.

Clancy stood for a long and profane moment, staring up the alley. Then, with his broad shoulders slumping, he grimly plodded on up Barton Street. He walked with the dreary hopelessness of a man to whom the worst has already happened. The only thing that remained now was to find out just what the worst was. The bad news was not long in coming.

He was nearly past Manny Epstein's little delicatessen before he noticed that something was wrong. The interior of the shop was dark, which was as it should be. Manny closed at eleven o'clock. But the street door wasn't closed. It gaped open in a crack some two inches wide.

Opening the door the rest of the way, Clancy stuck his head inside. The pleasing odors of cheeses and spiced meats and smoked fish wrinkled his nose. Back at the rear of the narrow room he could see a thin line of light under a door. There was a small store-room there, Clancy knew, with a desk where Manny often worked for an hour or two on his accounts after closing time.

You don't prowl the streets of a district month after month without getting to know the personal habits of most of its residents about as well as you know your own. Clancy knew Manny Epstein well enough to be certain that there was something wrong. Manny would never be careless enough to leave his front door unlocked when he closed up for the night.

Clancy tiptoed cautiously back along the single narrow aisle of the shop. Midway, his groping foot came down on a loose board. It promptly gave out with a groaning creak

that to Clancy's startled ears sounded loud enough to wake the dead. He discarded caution after that, and closed the distance to the rear door in half a dozen quick steps.

He flung the door open, then stood frozen in the doorway as his eyes took in the scene in the windowless little back room. Manny was there, but he wasn't working on his accounts. So far as Manny Epstein was concerned, all earthly accounts were forever closed.

His small body was crumpled on the floor in front of his old-fashioned roll-top desk. The back of his head looked like it had been caved in with the blunt side of a cleaver.

Manny had apparently put up a desperate fight before going down. The room was a mess. Splintered wall-shelves and shattered racks had disgorged their contents in fantastic confusion over the floor.

There were tins of every size and variety, from anchovies to corned beef. The contents of an overturned keg of marinated herring had been trampled into a silver-scaled mush in which fat lengths of liverwurst suggested the half-buried bodies of great purplish-brown worms. In the middle of the weird debris, an unbroken Edam cheese stared like a baleful eye of orange-red death.

Clancy picked his way gingerly through the mess and knelt beside Manny's body. There was no need to grope for any heartbeat. No man could possibly live with that hideous head wound.

Nor was there any need to seek the motive for the killing. Manny's worn leather bill-fold lay on the floor beside him, emptied of the thick sheaf of bills and small checks that Manny always carried.

Rage flooded redly through Clancy's brain as he stared down at the limply huddled body. That was the trouble with pounding the same beat month after month. You got to know your people too well.

This wasn't just a nameless stiff waiting for the meat-wagon to haul it to the morgue. This was Manny Epstein—a swell little guy who lived in a cozy flat just around the corner, where Clancy had often dropped in on his night off, to play two-handed pinochle with Manny and to gorge himself upon the steaming bowls of flaky matzo ball soup and thick slices of spicy kosher salami that Mrs. Epstein set before them.

THE faint rustle of a sleeve against the wall snapped Clancy's attention back to his surroundings, but he looked up a fraction of a second too late. He had only a flashing glimpse of a man's hand reaching for the wall-switch from behind a tall pile of packing cases. Then, before he could get to his feet, the room clicked into utter darkness.

There was the sound of a large body blundering in blind flight through the blackness. Clancy lunged to his feet and charged in the general direction of the shop door. He heard a grunt of pain from somewhere in the shop as his quarry apparently collided with something. Then one of Clancy's feet came down upon a cylindrical glass jar of olives.

He made a one-point landing squarely upon the back of his neck. By the time that he shook the wildly dancing stars from his dazed brain and groggily groped his way into the shop, it was too late. The street door now stood wide open. The shop was empty!

So was the street outside. The killer had had plenty of time to make it around the corner, and he had apparently used it. The only living thing visible in the block was Satan, haughtily stalking along the sidewalk some forty feet away.

"G'wan, scram, ye owl-eyed hoodoo!" Clancy said angrily. "Bad cess to your black soul, and haven't ye already brought enough evil luck to me this night, ye ill-begotten spawn of misfort—"

Clancy's maledictions died suddenly upon his lips as he realized that there was something very peculiar about Satan's actions. The big black cat was paying no attention to him whatever. His blazing eyes were fixed upon a deeply shadowed doorway. He began stalking the doorway, his furry body close to the ground, and his bushy tail twitching with eagerness.

From somewhere in the gloom of the doorway, a foot lashed in a vicious kick at Satan's battle-scarred head. Satan dodged the kick with practiced ease, then remained crouched just out of range. He yowled. But it was not his usual belligerent war-cry. It was a low wail of wistful yearning.

Clancy barged purposefully down the sidewalk.

"All right, you!" he ordered. "Come on out of there!"

A hulking figure slowly came from the doorway. He was a big brute, with the sloping shoulders of a wrestler, and the heavy, flat face of a not particularly intelligent bull ape. He walked with a decided limp.

"So that's the reason ye couldn't make it on around the corner, or up an alley," Clancy said exultantly. "Ye banged your leg on your way out of Manny's."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," the fellow said sullenly. "I just stopped in that doorway to light a cigarette."

"And to play with the cat?" Clancy asked derisively. He jerked his head toward where Satan crouched a yard away, his tail twitching as he watched "Ape Face" with singular intentness.

"Can I help it if cats like me?" the fellow demanded.

Clancy's face darkened. "Listen, mug!" he said savagely. "Let's quit blarneyin' around. That cat don't like you, or nobody else. What it likes is fish—and you got enough marinated herring smeared on your shoes to draw every cat in this end of town. Ye got that herring on your feet when ye slugged Manny Epstein to death there in his back room!"

Ape Face's right hand came from behind his back. It clutched a short length of blood-stained pipe that whistled in a murderous arc toward Clancy's head. Clancy's night-stick flashed. There was a crack of locust against wrist bone and the lethal pipe dropped from Ape Face's numbed fingers.

Ape Face swung a wild left hook that bounced harmlessly off Clancy's lifted shoulder. The night-stick cracked again, and this time it was against skull bone.

Clancy knelt beside Ape Face's stertorously snoring body for a moment, then rose with grim satisfaction upon his face. Any lingering doubt that the blood-stained pipe was the weapon that had crumpled Manny's head was dispelled by the name on the checks tucked in Ape Face's pocket.

Clancy hooked a hand in the sleeping killer's collar and dragged him down the sidewalk toward the call-box on the corner. Satan followed him at a discreet distance, his eyes blazing in indignation over losing his fragrant find.

"Cheer up, baby," Clancy said, and for the first time since he had known the big black cat there was something almost like affection in his voice. "Before the night is over, I'll be bringin' ye something a lot more stomach fillin' than the smell of fish on a murderin' blackguard's shoes."

It was well over an hour before things were cleared up enough that Clancy could keep his word, and he had to talk Joe into delving into his private larder to do it. Clancy leaned against a light-post and surveyed the result with pardonable pride. It was a large can of salmon—not the pale pink kind, but luscious ruddy hunks of genuine, and expensive Alaska red.

Satan crouched happily beside the salmon-covered newspaper spread out on the sidewalk and ate until his black sides bulged.

"I'm apologizin' to ye, spalpeen," Clancy said contritely, with the precinct captain's words of praise still warm within his ears. "'Tis no hoodoo ye are, 'tis a mascot. And with the splendid nose for crime ye have, 'tis a fine and outstandin' credit to the force ye are!"

Satan looked up at his former enemy. He couldn't purr, because purring was an art that he had never learned. But he did the best he could. He put all the affection and gratitude in his heart into a large and magnificent burp.

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(Adv.)

The truck was bearing down on the pedestrian

Joe Kerr sets out to investigate a strange crooked damages racket!

Twenty Grand Leg

By WALTER WILSON

JOE KERR knew right away it was another phony accident. He was walking along Vinton Street when it happened. Darkness had just settled and the street lights hadn't been on over ten minutes. The street seemed to be deserted until the truck appeared. It came from Joe's rear and passed him on the left.

As the truck passed Joe Kerr, a man stepped from the sidewalk and began to cross the intersection ahead. The truck was coming fast and the man didn't seem to notice it as he walked slowly and deliberately across the pavement. Joe Kerr sensed that there was a chance for an accident and stopped.

The truck didn't honk until it was bearing down on the pedestrian. The pedestrian jerked his head up and stopped. The truck slowed for an instant as the driver applied the brakes but it shot ahead again immediately. Apparently the brakes had failed to hold. The man in front of the truck moved fast at the last moment.

Joe Kerr clenched his fists and clamped his teeth together at that last second. He was in perfect position to be a star witness, because the point of impact was going to be directly between him and the street light at the far corner of the intersection. The front end of the truck and the figure of the man were clearly outlined in that light.

The brakes of the truck caught now. The big tires screeched as they slid over asphalt coating. The man screamed as his body shot away to the left and rolled over and over on the pavement. The truck skidded on across the intersection and came to a stop. The man stopped rolling and lay still.

Before Joe Kerr could move a step, two men came, seemingly from nowhere, and ran out to the prostrate figure on the pavement. The truck driver got out of his cab and came running back. The three of them knelt by the victim. Joe Kerr started to sprint forward to join them.

He changed his mind and decided to stand there and watch them for a minute. He wanted to see how those smart lads would play the game out. There was no doubt at all that it was just a slick scheme. There hadn't been any accident at all. The truck had not even touched the man. With that street light making the scene stand out like an etching Joe had clearly seen a space of at least a foot between the man and the truck as the truck swept by.

THOSE two men who had run out to the fallen man had been planted there as witnesses for the complainant. They would tell a sad story of how the driver of the truck had run down the man with almost criminal negligence, of the sickening impact of hard steel and flesh and bones, of a body being tossed into the air and landing in an inert mass twenty feet away from the point of contact.

There would be three of them to shout down any story that the truck driver might tell. On that angle even Joe Kerr would have to admit that it wasn't the driver's fault that there hadn't been an actual impact. That truck had been coming too fast in the first place. The brakes of the truck hadn't worked properly, hadn't taken hold until the truck was almost on top of the victim. Was it possible that the driver of the truck was a party to the plot? That would probably come out later.

Kerr hung back and watched. It was going to be fun to see this thing develop, then blow them all out of the water later with an impartial statement of what had actually happened. Joe Kerr had another angle, too. He was a private detective. It was possible he might make a more or less honest penny out of the affair if he worked it right. He reasoned that he ought to collect a modest fee if he saved a trucking company or an insurance concern from paying off on that phony accident.

So he let matters proceed for a minute before he strolled on up to the intersection. The three men about the recumbent figure seemed to be arguing.

"You ain't got a leg to stand on, driver," one of the witnesses announced loudly. "We saw the whole thing plain as day. You was coming down the street like a fire truck. You never used your horn till about two seconds before you hit him and he didn't have any warning. You didn't even put on your brakes till the last instant."

"I did too put my brakes on," the driver mumbled. "But the brakes didn't work at first. I had to pump 'em two or three times before they caught. Then it was too late to stop. I tried to pull out to the right and miss him but I couldn't make it."

"Well, we can't just stand here and argue while the guy is dyin'," the third man put in. "You got an empty truck there, haven't you? Give us a hand. Let's carry him over and put him in the truck. There's a hospital about six blocks from here. We can take him there in a few minutes, long before we could get an ambulance here. We got to handle him carefully. Looks to me like he's got a busted leg."

By the time Joe Kerr reached them other spectators were arriving at the scene. The two witnesses for the complainant didn't waste any more time. They lifted the still form from the pavement and carried it to the truck, placed it inside on a pile of quilts that the driver quickly arranged. The two men got into the truck with the victim and the driver ran around and climbed into his cab. The truck moved away fast. Joe Kerr marked the name on that truck.

Windsor Storage Company. A big company and financially responsible.

Joe Kerr grinned. He knew the group of casualty companies that carried the insurance on the Windsor Storage Company's trucks. He was familiar with the rather tight-fisted gentleman who handled such matters for the casualty companies. His name was Theodore McNutt. McNutt suffered physical pain and mental agony every time he had to part with money, whether it was his own or the firm's. The pain and agony was trebled when he had to disgorge to Joe Kerr. Joe had done special work for him on several occasions. Joe was going to take an added pleasure in making Theodore McNutt cough up for exposing this phony play for damages.

It was late the next afternoon when Kerr walked into McNutt's private office. McNutt straightened his bony figure in his chair and gazed at Joe Kerr with outright suspicion. McNutt had a long, dour face and his hair was graying at the temples.

"What do you want, Joe?" he asked sourly.

"You've got the wrong cue this time, McNutt," Kerr answered, with a chuckle. "You ought to have the welcome mat out for me and be wearing a beaming smile. You're going to throw both your arms around my neck and sob with joy when I tell you what I'm here for."

"So?" McNutt said acidly. "Just what are you here for?"

"To save you money, McNutt. I've come here out of the goodness of my heart. Purely for old time's sake. Just to save you a nice wad of dough."

McNUTT snorted. "You, Joe Kerr, are going to save me money? I don't believe the age of miracles has arrived yet. So you can skip the sales talk and get down to tacks. What new racket have you promoted now? And why should you pick on me for the fall guy?"

"You hit the nail right on the head there, McNutt," Joe Kerr's grin broadened. "You're the fall guy all right, you and your wealthy pals. But I didn't promote the racket. I just happened to fall into the rôle of innocent spectator. It was an accident. An accident that will put a nice nick in your roll—if I don't step in and save you."

"What accident?"

"It happened last night at the intersection of Twenty-fifth and Vinton Streets. You're going to get a nice fat claim for it—if you haven't already. A guy was crossing the street out there last night. One of the Windsor Storage trucks was involved."

"I know all about it," McNutt snapped. "The claim is already in and I've made a pretty thorough investigation of the facts. And just how do you propose to save us money on the claim?"

"By telling you the simple truth about it, McNutt. I happened to be on Vinton Street last night when it happened. I had a clear, unobstructed view of the whole thing. I saw the helpless victim start to cross the street. I saw the big truck bearing down on him. I heard the scream of agony and saw the mangled body roll over the pavement. I saw the poor chap picked up, put in the truck and carted away to the hospital."

"Isn't that just lovely?" McNutt asked with soft sarcasm. "You saw the whole thing? Now get down to the point and tell how you are going to save me money."

"I'm going to, McNutt. Of course, I expect to receive a reasonable check for services rendered after I've saved you this dough. You wouldn't try to cheat me, would you?"

"I'll pay you for services rendered, Joe. Now what's your story?"

"Why, there wasn't any accident at all, McNutt. The thing was a frame pure and simple. That truck never hit the guy at all. The truck and the man were between me and the street light and I couldn't be wrong. The truck missed the guy a foot. But he let out the big yell just the same and did a few rollovers on the pavement. Then two stooges shot out and took charge. They were planted there as witnesses. I don't know whether the truck driver was in on it or not. Anyway, the story he tells won't do you any good. But I'm the smart little lad that can blow them out of the water. That guy wasn't hit at all."

Theodore McNutt frowned heavily. "You're the only one that says so."

"Sure, I am. They took this mug to Dr. Zoller's Hospital, didn't they? That ought to be enough to tip you off—with

Zoller's reputation. I don't doubt they framed it good. The victim will probably show a lot of bruises. He'll have terrible pains in his head and his back and they'll all claim he'll be an invalid the rest of his life. But now you can sit back and laugh at 'em. You won't have to pay off a dime. The guy wasn't touched by that truck."

"There is indisputable evidence that he was hit by that truck," McNutt said stonily. "Evidence that even your slightly doubtful reputation for veracity will not overcome."

"What evidence?" Joe Kerr demanded.

"A leg. A leg that is now consumed in Dr. Zoller's incinerator. So the accident was a phony, huh?" McNutt raised his voice accusingly. "And the truck didn't hit the guy at all? I suppose this guy just agreed to let Dr. Zoller cut off his leg so he could collect damages? Well, if he did we couldn't prove it in a thousand years."

Joe Kerr's eyes were bulging a little. "I can't believe it," he gasped. "I can't believe that they could find a guy that would deliberately agree to fake an accident like that and then let them saw off his leg. There must be a trick about it somewhere."

"There was no trick!" McNutt insisted. "We sent over a doctor this morning. That man's leg was amputated. Zoller said it was terribly mangled when they brought him in, that there was nothing left for him to do but go ahead and take off the leg. Now how are you going to save me money on a case like that?"

"I'm ready to swear that the truck didn't hit him at all," Kerr said weakly.

"I wouldn't dare let you go on the stand," McNutt sneered. "It would be you against at least three witnesses and an amputated leg. They've got Wellington Jones to handle the case for them. I can just hear Wellington Jones tearing into you on cross-examination. He'd have you arrested for perjury before you got out of the courtroom. You've testified in a lot of cases for us. He'd make out a case, all right. He'd say you were lying for a fee."

JOE KERR sat back in his chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. McNutt was right. Against a set-up like that he'd look silly. Yet he still was sure that accident had been faked. The truck hadn't touched the man. The man hadn't got his leg mangled by letting out a yell and rolling over on the pavement.

"And maybe you are lying about it," McNutt charged harshly. "Maybe you thought you could collect a nice fee with a trumped-up story about how you saw that accident. Maybe you're just another private detective on the make. Your story doesn't make sense."

"I guess you're right, McNutt," Kerr admitted. "It doesn't make sense—with that line-up against it."

"We'll be lucky if we settle off the case on the right side of twenty grand," McNutt scowled. "Wellington Jones hinted at thirty grand. He hinted again he might come down to twenty-five grand for a quick settlement."

"But you don't have to make a quick settlement, McNutt," Kerr argued earnestly. "Now it happens that I believe my own eyes. I still think the case is a phony. I want a chance to prove it."

"Go ahead and prove it," McNutt invited him, with irony.

"You're stuck for real dough on this job, McNutt. You ought to be glad to cough up if I pull the trick and upset this scheme. How about twenty per cent of what I save you?"

"Twenty per cent!" McNutt started to protest in outraged dignity. Then he shrugged. "Agreed," he said with a malignant smile, "considering that you haven't got a ghost of a chance to collect."

"Let me see the dope you've got on the case," Kerr said. "I want to check all these guys from A to Z."

"I've done a fair job of checking myself," McNutt smirked. "I sent out wires right away and got reports on everyone mentioned. None of these parties are crooks. Go ahead and help yourself to the dope."

McNutt had worked fast, Joe Kerr found out. The name of the man who had had his leg amputated was Ernest Dort. Dort, only a few hours out from under the ether, had given McNutt a brief statement. Among the facts were his birthplace and some of the places he had worked in the last few years. McNutt had sent out wires and had received replies in some instances. The wires confirmed Dort's statements.

From the wires it was plain that Dort did not seem to be a crook. About the worst that could be said about him was that he was a floater. He had done a lot of rambling about the country.

One wire was from a concern in Seattle. Dort had been employed by them just three months ago. He had worked in a warehouse and his job had consisted of wheeling heavy boxes about on hand trucks. That killed one theory that Joe Kerr had in his mind. No man could have handled a job like that if there had been anything the matter with his leg.

Kerr also became convinced that there hadn't been any switch in that truck on the way to the hospital. Dort was the man who had been picked up on Vinton Street and he was the man who had had his leg amputated.

JOE KERR darkly conceded that McNutt had reached a reasonable conclusion. Even though this accident might have been a phony, the business of taking off the leg had just about clinched its purpose. That smart lawyer, Wellington Jones, would laugh anybody out of court who tried to advance the theory that Ernest Dort, in sound mind and health, had permitted Dr. Zoller to saw off a good leg for the purpose of collecting damages. It looked as if that was the truth of it but no jury, hearing the testimony of the two witnesses and the truck driver, was going to fall for any part of such truth. Their verdict would be that the casualty companies were asserting a wild and unbelievable theory in an effort to defeat a legitimate and meritorious claim. McNutt, although he loved his employer's dough far more than the average agent, knew that, right or wrong, he was stuck.

Joe Kerr would have thrown up his hands, too—if he hadn't seen that phony accident with his own eyes. Kerr made up his mind that he wouldn't concede anything. If there was any vulnerable spot in the smart scheme he was going to find it—and collect that twenty per cent that McNutt had agreed to. McNutt had assumed, of course, that he was perfectly safe in making that promise.

Kerr looked up the two witnesses in the case. They were both nobodies but they had jobs and it would be difficult to undermine their testimony.

The one weak link in the chain seemed to be Dr. Zoller. There was nothing against Dr. Zoller that could be charged outright. Only he seemed to make a habit of furnishing expert testimony in damage cases. Not a few of the cases were of patients he had treated in his own hospital. But even though the doctor had achieved a certain shady reputation he had been pretty smooth in his maneuverings and was not open to a direct challenge.

Joe Kerr checked on Ernest Dort's local record the next morning. Dort had been in town about two months. He was employed by the American Glass Factory. He had received twenty dollars a week for sitting on a stool and inspecting table glasses that came by on a belt. All he had to do was watch the glasses and throw out the imperfect ones. His services, his foreman said, had been satisfactory. Dort had been a quiet man, well-behaved.

Dort had lived in a small two-room shack down by the river where he had done his own housekeeping and cooking. Kerr went down and looked that shack over. There wasn't much to see. Everything seemed to be just as Dort had left it shortly before he had wound up in Dr. Zoller's hospital with his leg missing. There wasn't a thing in the shack that Joe Kerr could put a finger on.

Kerr next turned his attention to the truck driver. His name was Orrin Hix. Hix had worked for the Windsor Storage Company about three months. Up to the time of this accident he had had no trouble of any kind. He lived in a room at 4765 Pike Street.

Joe Kerr went up to that room in the afternoon. He didn't expect any answer when he knocked. He looked at the cheap lock and took a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the door after three tries. The room wasn't much. There was an iron bedstead, a dresser, two chairs and some odds and ends. Kerr walked across the room and opened the door of the closet. A suit of clothes was hanging there. There was no label on the suit. There was a pair of new shoes on the floor, an extra hat on the shelf. Kerr looked at the band inside the hat. There was a name there. Emmons Toggery Shop, Raton, New Mexico.

Joe Kerr went back into the room and rummaged through the dresser. Five

shirts, some ties, socks, and underwear. No papers or letters of any kind.

He was back in the center of the room when he heard the doorknob turning. He didn't have a chance to get out. He stood there and waited. The tall, heavy-shouldered young man blinked when he spotted Joe.

"What you doin' in my room?" he growled.

"Came up to see you, Hix," Kerr said easily. "The door was open so I thought I'd come on in and wait for you."

"You'd had quite a wait if I hadn't got off early," Hix said narrowly. "What would you want to see me about?"

"That accident on Vinton Street. I'm investigating it."

"I already made a statement to the cops about it," Hix said in an unpleasant tone. "I made a complete report to my company on it. I made out a report to the insurance company that covered the risk. Now where do you come in?"

"I'm one of the witnesses, Hix."

"Witness to what?"

"To the accident."

"I didn't see you around there."

"I was there just the same. I saw the whole thing. You admitted you hit the guy, didn't you?"

"Sure I admit it. I'd look fine denyin' that I hit him, wouldn't I? With the poor guy layin' there in the hospital with his leg off. My brakes failed me in the pinch. I couldn't help bangin' into him."

"I guess it isn't very pleasant to bowl over a man like that."

"It was awful!" Hix shut his eyes. "I dreamed about it again all last night. I could see him tryin' to get out of the way—then how the truck hit him—and how he flew through the air."

"That was just the way it happened?"

"Sure."

"Then you're in on it, too."

Hix's face went blank. "In on what?"

"Why, the frame, Hix. I told you I saw the accident. Only it wasn't a real accident. You didn't hit that Ernest Dort at all. You missed him by a good foot."

HIX stared at Kerr blankly.

"You're crazy!" said Hix.

"Dort faked the whole thing. He let go a scream, jumped a little, and rolled. Then those two made-to-order witnesses dashed out and put on their act. I wasn't positive about you when you drove away with them in the truck. Now I am."

"You're completely bugs!" Orrin Hix exploded. "I drove that truck straight to a hospital one of the guys directed me to. I stayed right there to see how bad he was hurt. The doc said his right leg had to come off right away. To save his life. The doc took the leg off. Now I suppose this Dort was foolish enough to have a perfectly good leg sawed off just so he could put in a claim for damages against the outfit I work for. That don't add up, Mister. You'll just make a sucker out of yourself if you try to make anybody believe a yarn like that."

"You're right on that, Hix. I know the truth about that accident but I can't make the truth stick against you, Ernest Dort, and the two witnesses unless I can back it up by evidence. What's your percentage on the pay-off, Hix?"

"I ain't gettin' no percentage," Hix denied, his face reddening. "That accident was on the level. All you're doing is tryin' to cheat that poor devil who lost his leg out of what's comin' to him."

"I want to see him get what's coming to him, Hix. And the same to you, Doc Zoller and the two witnesses who are in on this play."

The big truck driver doubled his fists and bared his teeth. "I know I left my door locked when I left here," he said harshly. "You worked the lock, got in here to prowl my place and see what you could find. You're no better than a burglar. I got a perfect right to smash your face in and throw you out in the street."

Joe Kerr's jaw squared belligerently. "Sure you've got the right, Hix. But have you got the sand to try it?"

Hix looked Kerr over carefully for a moment. Joe Kerr was three inches shorter than Hix and he had less bulk in his shoulders. Hix rose on his toes, then lunged forward. He brought his right far backward, then swung it around for a haymaker. It was meant to annihilate Kerr with one devastating impact.

Hix belonged to the school of rough and tumble fighters. He didn't bother to raise his left hand for protection against a possible counter blow. Joe Kerr was short and compact—and quick. He stepped inside, brought his right against that exposed jaw in a short, pistonlike punch. The big man went up on his toes,

grunted, then quivered. Kerr stepped back a little to make room for him on the floor. Hix lay there, his eyes a little glassy.

Kerr stepped over him and walked out of the room. Hix wasn't interested enough to make a grab at a leg. Kerr went down to Theodore McNutt's office.

He went over McNutt's file on the Dort case again. McNutt hadn't overlooked the truck driver. Hix, like Dort, had worked at a large assortment of jobs in various places. There was no mention of Raton, New Mexico. Joe Kerr sent a wire to Raton.

The answer came four hours later and it was disappointing. It said simply:

ORRIN HIX UNKNOWN HERE AND NO RECORD OF EMPLOYMENT

Maybe that name in the hat didn't mean a thing. It was possible that Hix had just dropped into Raton for a day or two and bought a hat while there. Joe Kerr took another look through McNutt's file and sent another wire asking about Ernest Dort. This time the answer wasn't entirely a dud. The wire said:

ERNEST DORT EMPLOYED AS AMBULANCE AND HEARSE DRIVER BY STONE MORTUARY FOR THREE MONTHS STOP CLEAN RECORD HERE

Joe Kerr grinned as he re-read that wire. Neither Dort nor Hix had mentioned Raton in their statements of their travels. But Dort had worked there and Hix had stopped off there at least long enough to buy a hat. And the fact that Ernest Dort had driven an ambulance indicated that he might know something about accidents.

Joe Kerr called the airline offices and made a reservation.

He called McNutt the minute he got off the plane on the return trip. McNutt wasn't in his office.

"He's out at the Zoller Hospital," Miss Leary, his secretary, explained over the wire. "On that Ernest Dort case. He came to terms with Wellington Jones for a quick settlement. McNutt is out there signing them up and paying off."

"How much is he handing them?" Joe asked.

"I think it's fifteen thousand," she replied.

Kerr ran out and got a taxi. . . .

IT WAS a large, sunny room that Joe Kerr entered twenty minutes later. Ernest Dort was lying in the hospital bed. He was smiling, obviously pleased and comfortable. McNutt was sitting in a chair by the bed with his briefcase and a stack of papers on his lap. Dr. Zoller stood near the foot of the bed. Wellington Jones sat by McNutt. Orrin Hix, the truck driver, was sitting in a chair at the other side of the bed.

"I think this is a fortunate settlement for you, McNutt," Wellington Jones was saying in his rich baritone. "We could undoubtedly have obtained a large judgment if we had gone to trial. But I always prefer compromise in a case of this kind."

"Skip it," McNutt said sourly. "We've been robbed and we know it. Now you've all signed your statements. I've made the check out to the three of you, Dort, Zoller and Jones, so when you sign you release my companies from any further claim on the part of any of—"

McNutt saw Joe Kerr and stopped speaking. The others turned and stared at Kerr. Smiles disappeared. Hix reflectively put a hand up to the left side of his jaw. "What do you want, Joe?" McNutt asked.

"Same complaint, McNutt. I still want to save you some money."

McNutt's eyes searched Kerr's face but Kerr only smiled.

"I've just settled this case," McNutt said stiffly. "For fifteen thousand. I've already delivered the check."

"To me," Wellington Jones said importantly. He turned to Kerr. "What business is it of yours?"

"You may have a little trouble cashing that check," Kerr told him.

"Why?"

"The check will have to be endorsed." Kerr turned and faced Orrin Hix, the truck driver. "You wouldn't endorse it, would you?"

"Why should I?" Hix retorted. "I've got nothin' to do with it. I just come here because Jones asked me to. So I could tell about the accident if there was any dispute at the last minute. That check is made out to Jones, Zoller and Ernest Dort."

Joe Kerr still kept his eyes on the truck driver. "I'm still asking you the same question," he said softly. "Will you endorse that check—Dort?"

"That's not Dort," Wellington Jones said impatiently. "That's Orrin Hix, the truck driver. This is Ernest Dort in bed."

"Not in my book, Jones," Joe Kerr said firmly. "Orrin Hix is in the bed. It was Ernest Dort that drove the truck. That's how the trick was pulled, McNutt."

"What trick?" Jones snapped. "What would be the sense of swapping names?"

"It made plenty of sense," Joe said. "They switched names so that Ernest Dort could be established as a man having a sound leg up to the time of this accident. McNutt's files showed that Ernest Dort's last job was moving heavy boxes about on a hand truck, a job he couldn't have done with an artificial leg. But it was Orrin Hix, using Dort's name who actually did that work. The real Dort was hiding out, learning how to use his artificial leg so it wouldn't be discovered under ordinary circumstances. It wasn't detected when he went to work for the American Glass Company. Dort, really Hix, sat at a table and inspected glassware. No one noticed that he had an artificial leg when he came and left his work."

"This is fantastic," Wellington Jones sputtered.

"Not so fantastic when you get all the facts," Joe amended. "I just got back from a trip to Raton, New Mexico. Now Ernest Dort, the real one, had a job there driving an ambulance. On one occasion he brought into a hospital a bum who had a leg mangled while hopping a train about twenty miles from Raton. The bum was the real Orrin Hix. While picking up accident cases, Dort had developed some ideas. He got acquainted well with Hix whose leg had been taken off a few inches above the ankle. So the two of them worked out the racket. Dort convinced Hix that it would be worth his while to undergo another small operation if he could collect a few grand for the trouble. Dort bought Hix the artificial leg. When they left Raton they switched names."

"I get it," McNutt said brightly. "So when I wired around to the places where Ernest Dort had worked I got reports that Dort was an able-bodied man, that he had held jobs that couldn't possibly have been handled by a one-legged man. You can prove all this, Joe?"

THE detective nodded his head.

"Sure, McNutt. When they had established that vital point, Dort, the real one, blew in here. He found out that Dr. Zoller often handled accident cases and got acquainted with him. Then he obtained a job as a driver for the Windsor Company. When everything was set he brought Hix on and Hix took the right kind of job at the glass factory. They waited just long enough to make things look right, then pulled the accident. They had the two witnesses ready to see that Hix was rushed to the hospital before anyone else could get a good look at his supposed injuries. It was a cinch for Dr. Zoller to work Hix's stump over so that it would look like a fresh amputation. After that all they had to do was sit back and collect."

"If there has been a fraud here I am an innocent party," Wellington Jones said shakily. "Dr. Zoller called me here to the hospital, said he had a case for me. I only know what he told me about it and what the witnesses said."

Joe Kerr looked at the truck driver and grinned. "How about it, Dort? You going to endorse that check?"

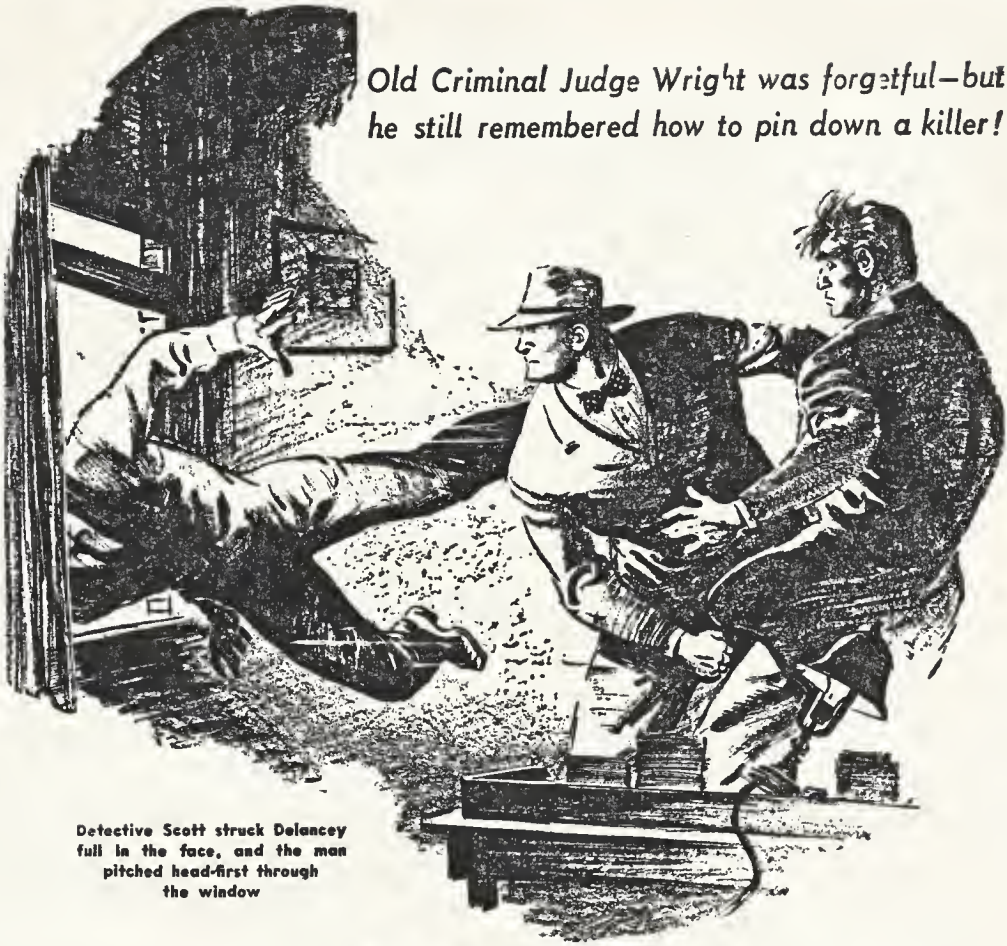
Dort's face purpled. "You dirty, snoopin' little rat!" he bellowed and came around the bed to Joe Kerr. Dort was one of those fellows who never seem to learn by experience. He brought his big fist up from his heels and swung it with all his might. Again he failed to raise his left for protection. Joe Kerr stepped inside again and nailed him with the same paralyzing punch. And Dort was looking up from the floor with only the vaguest interest in further proceedings.

"Nice work, Joe," Theodore McNutt said generously. "I'll see that you get a check for a thousand this afternoon."

"It'll be three thousand, McNutt. Twenty percent of the fifteen grand you were forking over. That's what you promised me and that's what you'll pay me."

"Three thousand, then." McNutt uttered a deep sigh. "You insist on holding me to what was practically a slip of the tongue in an unguarded moment."

Old Criminal Judge Wright was forgetful—but he still remembered how to pin down a killer!



Detective Scott struck Delancey full in the face, and the man pitched head-first through the window

ONE TRIAL LESS

By TED COUGHLAN

WAYNE WRIGHT, old Judge of the Criminal Court in Miami, Florida, stood irresolute before the ornate door of the automatic elevator in the foyer of his apartment hotel. He pressed the "down" button with his stubby, gnarled finger and glanced at his watch without seeing it.

"I can't remember for the life of me," he thought with weary annoyance. "Was I supposed to meet them in Room Eleven-thirty at twelve o'clock, or Room Twelve-hundred at eleven-thirty?"

As a judge, an officer of the local rationing board, and member of the Civilian Defense Corps, Judge Wright had too many things to think of at one time. Margaret Sinclair, his efficient young secretary, kept track of all his appointments, and she had reminded him of this one.

He was selling the building. His appointment with his attorney and the prospective purchaser at either eleven-thirty or noon was to close the sale, which would enable him to retire to his beloved rose farm.

Again he looked at his watch. The elevator door opened and a heavy-set, gray-haired man stepped out. He was Harold

Jackson, the lessee of the apartment hotel. His shrewd black eyes took in the Judge's indecision.

"What's worying you, Judge?" he asked. in a loud, hearty voice, "You look lost."

Judge Wright impatiently shook his bushy white head.

"Good morning, Jackson. I was just wondering . . . have you seen either Caldwell or Barnes this morning? I have an appointment with them."

"They're both waiting for you in 'Eleven-thirty'. I took Caldwell up some time ago."

"Thank you, Jackson. How is everything?"

Jackson shrugged his broad shoulders. His voice grew less cordial, as he complained:

"I'm sure sorry you didn't give me another chance to take up that option. I really wanted to buy this building before my lease expires. I suppose it's too late now?"

"That's what I came to see my son-in-law about. Alexander Barnes is my attorney now, you know. If Mr. Caldwell buys the property, I'll see that you get your option money back." The Judge's kindly blue eyes twinkled benevolently.

"I'd rather have the building," Jackson grumbled, as the judge stepped into the automatic elevator.

The door to Eleven-thirty was unlatched. Pushing it open, he looked at the familiar furnishings. Absent-mindedly he recognized the heavy desk, littered with law books, as his own. This was the suite he reserved for himself as a refuge when he became too weary, after a strenuous day in court, to make the long trip to his country home.

HE TOOK off his shapeless Panama, and dropped it on the desk, then started toward the studio couch near the window, to rest a few minutes.

Rubbing his veined hand across his tired eyes, he moved toward the large brown couch, then stopped and stared. Two men seated on it, held stiff, unnatural poses. They were leaning toward one another, their heads lolling rather than resting halfway down the back cushions, their legs stretched awkwardly and too rigidly forward.

The judge's stubby fingers fumbled in his breast pocket. He found his glass case, snapped it open, put his thick-lensed pince-nez to his eyes, and peered again at the stiffening bodies of his son-in-law Alexander Barnes, and Joseph Caldwell, president of the Caldwell Realty Company.

There was a dark hole in the center of Caldwell's forehead. A smear of dried blood stained his too-white face.

Horrified, Wright looked closer. Was Barnes also . . . yes, a bullet hole yawned in his right temple! His hand, dangling over the edge of the couch, gripped an automatic revolver.

Judge Wright stumbled toward his desk and groped for the telephone. He dialed a number with palsied fingers. When Margaret's voice answered him, he realized that he had automatically called his office instead of Police Headquarters. His secretary spoke to him three times before he asked her to put the call through for him, then he dropped the receiver and slumped unconscious, his head resting on the edge of the desk. . . .

Reviving slowly, Judge Wright heard an excited babel of voices in the room. He looked up into the anxious, lean face of Inspector Holland, head of the Homicide Bureau. His face, at first a blur, gradually took on shape. He recognized the full, petulant mouth, snub nose, deep-set gray eyes and high, sloping forehead of the detective. Passing his hand over his eyes again, the judge sat upright.

"What's happened, Inspector?" he asked.

Holland shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Don't you remember calling me about this?" His square, hairy hand pointed to the sinister couch.

Still dazed, the judge looked around the familiar room. The place was now crowded with uniformed policemen. He met the compassionate and frightened glance of a slim blonde whom he recognized as his secretary, and he saw the superintendent of the building, a red-headed man in blue serge, its janitor, and Jackson.

Sudden, shocked remembrance returned to the judge. He hesitated, torn between the desire to go to his bereaved child and the necessity of assisting the police. He steadied himself.

"I remember now, Inspector," he said. "What do you make of it?"

"Obviously murder and suicide. How did you happen to discover it?"

The judge stood up shakily, and walked toward the two bodies. He looked at them for a long time, before answering.

"I had an appointment with them at noon," he said. "When I walked into the room they sat exactly as you found them. I called my office instead of you—from force of habit, I guess—then went out like a light. It's a common occurrence with—a shock, and out I go. The old ticker isn't what it used to be. Has the M.E. been here yet?"

Holland shook his head.

"He's on the way. His verdict will only be a formality. I can't understand why your son-in-law killed Caldwell and him-

self. Can you throw any light on it?"

Judge Wright sorrowfully shook his grizzled head.

"No. If it were the other way around, perhaps I might."

He leaned over the bodies again, examinnig them more closely. When he stood up, he was shaking his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry to make it harder for you, Inspector—but, but it's double murder. Alexander wouldn't and couldn't possibly have killed Caldwell."

The inspector jumped.

"What? You don't know what you're talking about, Judge. Why, just look! The only fingerprints on the gun are Barnes'. He certainly shot himself after murdering Caldwell."

"One the face of it, yes. But look again. Alexander has been dead much longer than Caldwell. I'm not a physician, but even I see that."

While the inspector was verifying the judge's diagnosis, Margaret Sinclair unscrewed the cap of a bottle, spilled a capsule into the palm of her hand, and imperatively handed it to her employer. His face twisted into a grimace, and he turned his head away.

"Come now, Your Honor, you know you must take it."

"My dear, this is no time for pills." Judge Wright made a wry face. "Why did you come over here, Margaret? Is there anybody in the office. Have you called Mrs. Barnes?"

"Of course. Here, take your pill. You know you need one any time you have an attack." The corners of her mouth were turned up in a half-smile, but her large, speckled hazel eyes held a concerned look, and a tiny frown furrowed her smooth, high forehead.

"Please, Your Honor!" she insisted.

WITH an exasperated sigh, the judge picked up the pill, and obediently swallowed it. She smiled at him as if he were a small boy who had done his mother's bidding without too much quibbling.

Inspector Holland pointed his stubby finger toward the taller policeman.

"Mulligan," he ordered, "find out if any other tenants heard the shots! And, Scott," —he indicated a plainclothes man—"you take those people into the next room and keep them there until I send for them."

"All of them, Inspector?" the detective looked bewildered.

"No, numbskull. Those four." Holland pointed to the three men and the girl, then suddenly asked the superintendent of the building, who had been standing moodily in a corner: "Who are you?"

"Paul Delancey, superintendent of the building. You sent for Mr. Jackson and me."

Holland nodded, looking at the janitor.

"And you're Cox. All right, take them out, Scott."

Before they left the room, the judge suggested:

"Margaret is an excellent stenographer, Inspector. You can use her until your own man arrives."

"Okay. You stay here, Miss Sinclair. Got your note-book with you?"

"Of course." Trying to act composed, Margaret sat down in the desk chair, her pencil poised over the open pad. "Do you want me to take down everything, Inspector, or just your questions and the answers?"

"Everything." Holland's frown changed to a semblance of a smile as he looked the girl over for the first time. "First of all, where were you when the murders were committed?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Inspector, unless you tell me when they happened."

"Never mind. I just wanted to see if you had a head on your shoulders."

Appeased, the girl transcribed the question and answer. When she had finished, Holland asked the judge:

"How long do you think Barnes has been dead?"

Wright's bushy gray eyebrows met over his Roman nose.

"About three hours. Caldwell must have been shot just before I came into the room. His body is still warm. Why hasn't the doctor shown up? He can tell you much better. I never finished my pre-medical course."

"He's on the way. How well did you know both men, Judge?"

"Hmm . . . I bounced Barnes on my knee." The old man's eyes grew moist. "He's been my personal attorney ever since he married my daughter. I hardly knew Caldwell before he tried to buy the building."

"Do you know anyone who would want to kill them?"

"Alexander being a criminal lawyer, had plenty of enemies—half the present and recent occupants of the State prison. I don't know about Caldwell."

"You're a lot of help, I must say." Holland chewed thoughtfully on the end of a pencil, then blurted out: "You've probably learned more about criminals through trials than I have by catching them. What do you suggest?"

"About the only thing I've learned by listening to the evidence on both sides of murder trials is what not to do when you kill a man. Right now, I don't think of any-

thing the murderer overlooked."

Mulligan barged in and slammed the door behind him.

"Not a one of them heard a thing, Inspector," he announced loudly. And I ain't surprised, with so many of them bombers flying around."

"Go into the next room and tell Scott to send Mr. Delancey in," Holland said contemptuously. "Then telephone Headquarters and find out what's keeping the M.E."

Mulligan left, chastised. In a few seconds, his bull-like voice was heard from the next room.

"Inspector, come in here! They're all dead!"

With a muffled oath, Holland left the room, followed by the judge and Margaret.

Next door, they found Mulligan ruefully biting his nails and staring at three men lying huddled in a corner. Holland rushed toward them, knelt down for a moment, then swore again.

"Get out of here and find the doctor!" he bellowed. "They're only stunned. Have him drop whatever he's doing and come over. Hey, where's Jackson?"

HOLLAND poured a drink from his pocket flask and poured it down Scott's throat. The bulky plainclothesman spluttered, then opened his eyes. Groggily, he sat up, supporting himself against the wall.

"What's been going on in here?" Holland demanded. "I leave you to watch three unarmed men, and—"

"Honest, Inspector, I don't get it. I went out for only a minute. Mr. Jackson wanted to go to his room and get himself some cigars. Just to make sure, I called downstairs to the cop on the door to see to it that he don't try to leave the building. I seen him to the elevator, and soon's it started up, I come back here. Soon's I opened the door, something slugged me. Next thing I knows you're pouring that drink down my throat."

He looked longingly at the flask, but Holland ignored the unspoken plea.

"Who hit you?"

"Sure, I wish I knew." The Homicide man's heavy eyebrows met in a frown over his bulbous red nose. "It could have been either of them, then again—" He glanced toward the now stirring victims. "Maybe he can tell you more," he suggested lamely, as the door swung open again, and Jackson walked in.

Holland pounced on him.

"Where have you been?"

Jackson stared unbelievingly at the janitor and Delancey. They were showing signs of returning consciousness. He shook his graying head.

"Up to my room for a cigar. Scott allowed me to leave here for a few minutes."

Judge Wright's sensitive nostrils contracted as he sniffed several times.

"I wonder why Mr. Jackson isn't smoking," he suggested, in his mildest voice. "It seems to me, if he wanted a cigar that badly he would have one lighted."

Holland looked quickly at Jackson's breast pocket. It was flat and empty. There was a challenge in his voice as he demanded:

"Well, where is the stogy you went for?"

Jackson's broad shoulders sagged slightly. His voice dropped, as he admitted:

"I didn't even look for a cigar, Inspector. I have an accountant working down in the office. I wanted to see him, and also to call up my attorney."

"What do you need an attorney for? Nobody's charged you with anything—yet." It was impossible to miss the significant pause Holland made.

The corners of the judge's rather small mouth rose ever so slightly.

"I think I can answer that, Inspector," he answered for Jackson. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Jackson, but didn't you tell your attorney to put in a bid for this building? Now that Caldwell is dead?"

Jackson nodded his head emphatically.

"I didn't want to bother you, Judge, but you know I was sore about losing my option before."

Holland was not through with Jackson.

"Why do you have an accountant going over the books now?" he asked. "It's not the end of the year."

"My lease is about out," Jackson answered promptly, "and I want a check on everything before the judge sells the building. I'm glad I thought of it, too. The accountant says that Delancey was taking me for a ride. He ain't sure for how much, until he gets through."

Holland's glance shifted from Jackson to Delancey and back again. Then he saw that the janitor had come to.

"What happened, Cox?" he asked.

The janitor shrugged his heavy square shoulders. He rubbed the top of his touseled head with his none too clean, rough hand.

"That's what I'd like to know, I was sitting over there, waiting for you to get through, when all of a sudden it felt like the ceiling caved in on me, and out I went."

"Did you see Mr. Jackson leave the room?"

"Sure, he went out with the Headquarter's man. I didn't see neither of them come back, though."

Judge Wright was listening to the questioning, while slowly wandering around the room, examining it minutely. He stopped long enough to help the building superin-

tendent off the floor, then walked toward the window and stared out thoughtfully. When the Inspector spoke to Delancey, the Judge turned and listened.

"Well, what can you tell me about the attack?" was Holland's first question.

"Nothing more than the others, but—but—" Delancey stopped, and glared at Jackson. "I was sitting with my back to the door. I heard a thud, and started to turn around, but before I could make out what was going on, I was struck down myself. I wouldn't be sure, but—" Again he stopped, this time significantly.

THE judge spoke up, as if addressing a hesitant witness. His voice had a sharp edge to it.

"Why don't you say what you're thinking, Mr. Delancey? It's plain to me that you are under the impression that your employer knows something about the assault."

Delancey shook the dust off his sharply pressed trousers, and wiped his face with a handkerchief. His well-modulated voice was still hesitant.

"I'm not certain of it, Your Honor—that is, not certain enough to accuse him directly. But he appears to be the only one of the four of us who escaped unhurt."

Jackson flared up. His full face reddened.

"Why, you—" he shouted and swore vehemently. "You know I left the room before you got slugged."

Holland let them argue for a while, then stepped between them.

"Did you see Cox get hit?" he asked Delancey.

"No," Delancey again insinuated, "but I still think Jackson knows more than he admits. He could have slugged your policeman out in the hall, then come in here quietly and knocked both of us out. The thud I heard must have been Cox falling."

Jackson's bulk lunged at the superintendent. The Inspector pulled him away, told him to keep quiet, and listened as Delancey continued.

"He is sore at me. He blames me for queering his chance to buy this building. With this present real estate boom on, he'd do anything to get it."

"Why, you—you cursed swindler! What are you trying to do? Make the inspector think that I killed them?"

This time Delancey flared up. He snatched up a chair and threw it quickly at Jackson. It missed him, and crashed against the wall.

"You're a fine one to accuse me of anything!" he snarled in a coldly furious voice. "Why don't you admit that you killed them, instead of trying to blacken my reputation to cover yourself up?"

Inspector Holland had trouble separating the two men. He dragged Jackson away by the arm and pushed Delancey into a chair.

"That'll be enough from both of you!" he snapped. "You, Jackson, tell me where you spent the morning."

The answer came fast and pat.

"In my office with the accountant. I only left long enough to have a cup of coffee."

Judge Wright's mild voice contrasted with Jackson's bellow.

"Is that where I saw you going?"

"Where and when did you see him, Judge?" Holland turned sharply toward Wright.

"He was coming out of the elevator as I entered the building. He told me that he had admitted Mr. Caldwell to my room."

"Then he's going down to Headquarters for questioning." The inspector turned to Scott, the plainclothesman. "Have him booked for investigation! Let him get away and I'll have your head."

The detective handcuffed Jackson and hurried out, anxious to avoid any further threats. Holland shook his head wearily.

"Where did you spend the morning?" he asked Delancey.

"I've been busy ever since eight o'clock. This is the first of the month. I have been collecting rents, showing apartments and checking up."

"Did you leave the building at any time?"

"Yes, about ten-thirty I went to the bank to make a deposit."

"Do you have the slip to prove it?"

"Of course." Delancey handed it to the inspector.

"Hmm . . . this doesn't prove *you* were at the bank."

"I don't understand you, Inspector. Surely you wouldn't suspect me."

"I do. Especially if what Jackson charges is true. I suspect everybody until I find out who did it."

Holland turned as the door opened and a short, slim elderly man, carrying a doctor's bag, walked into the room.

"Well, what's your rush, Holland?" he drawled.

"Oh, so you finally woke up, Pearson," the inspector said sarcastically, pointing to Delancey and Cox. "Look them over. They got slugged."

DR. PEARSON examined both men's heads, dived into his bag, brought out a bottle of iodine, swabbed their injuries, and dismissed them.

"Superficial cuts," he said. "Neither of you were hit hard enough to swat a fly. Take an aspirin each and go back to work." He looked around the room. "Well, where are they, Holland?"

"In the next room. Let me know when they were killed, then you can cart them

off to the morgue."

As Pearson was leaving the room, Judge Wright asked hesitantly:

"Doctor?"

"What is it, Your Honor?"

The judge waited until he heard the elevator door click.

"Were either Cox or Delancey hit hard enough to make them lose consciousness for a few minutes?"

"I can't answer that truthfully without a more detailed examination, but Cox was apparently hit the harder. The same blow, which would kill one man wouldn't even stun another. It depends to a great extent on the thickness of the individual's skull, his general condition."

He launched into a technical explanation which none of his listeners understood. Noticing the blank expression on their faces, he broke off in the middle of his clinical discourse, and left the room.

"Rats!" Holland's biting words followed him.

"Call those men back, please," Judge Wright said, and his even voice held a slight edge of excitement, "and have the doctor examine them more thoroughly, as soon as he is through with the bodies."

"Why?" Holland stopped staring out through the window. "What difference does the thickness of their skulls make?"

"Please do, Inspector," the judge insisted. "I assure you that it will help clear up this case."

"It seems to be cleared up. Jackson will tell the whole truth in a hurry, when I crack down on him."

Judge Wright wagged his head.

"If he knows it," he said cryptically. "If you want to be sure of a conviction, you'd better listen to me." He walked over to the window and pointed. "Did you notice this before, Inspector?"

"What?"

"A brand new sash cord." Wright fingered the rope.

"Sure. What about it? Cox must have replaced the old frayed one. He's a good janitor."

"Yes, but why did he leave the window closed? He knows I'm a fresh air fiend."

The judge raised the sash. As soon as his hand left it, the frame slammed down again. He pulled on the cord, and it came loose.

He peered closer. The end, which should have been tied to the sash weight, had been cut away.

Holland also examined the cord then anxiously looked toward the elevator. He saw the indicator moving upward and waited until it stopped. Officer Mulligan, a smile of satisfaction on his flushed face, followed Delancey and Cox out.

The inspector herded them into the apartment and slammed the door in Mulligan's face. Inside, he took Cox by the arm and led him toward the window.

"When did you put in that cord?" he asked.

The janitor's bushy eyebrows went up.

"Yesterday. I didn't want to wait until the old one broke."

"Why didn't you finish the job?" Holland pointed to the cut end of the cord.

"I fixed it right, opened the window, and went about me other jobs."

"Do you have a knife, Superintendent?" Judge Wright asked Delancey pointedly.

Delancey's slim, long-fingered hand went toward his trouser pocket. He kept it there when he saw the door open and Detective Scott return with Jackson. Dr. Pearson also walked in.

"Caldwell was killed around eleven-thirty to noon." the M. E. reported to the inspector. "Barnes has been dead since about ten o'clock. Can I send for the wagon?"

"First take another look at those men. I want to know exactly how hard they were hit."

Pearson motioned to the detective to sit down. When Scott took off his hat, the doctor examined his head painstakingly. In answer to the judge's inquiring look, he explained:

"He got a nasty bump. Enough to knock him out for a minute or two." He reached into his bag, and took out a bottle. "Here, take one of those, then go home and take it easy for a day or two. All right, Cox." He motioned the sullen janitor to sit down.

"Aw, I'm all right," Cox said shamefacedly, as he put on his hat.

Delancey stopped glaring at Jackson long enough to say to Cox:

"Well, what are you scared of? Maybe I was wrong after all, and you—"

BEFORE he could finish, Cox jumped at him. He swung both fists, and connected. Delancey staggered and bumped into Jackson. All at once, they were engaged in a fierce free-for-all fight. Both the inspector and the judge tried to separate them.

The judge stumbled, tripped over the M. E.'s bag, and fell to the floor, taking Pearson with him. Before he could rise, he heard the sound of breaking glass, and looked toward the window.

Delancey appeared bent on pushing the inspector through the narrow window frame. He had one hand on the Homicide man's shoulder, and was trying to force him through the opening. Jackson's manacled hands were holding his other arm.

Holland braced the lower part of his body against the window ledge. He kicked up-

ward savagely, missed Delancey, and caught Jackson in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind out of the man, and forced him to relax his grip on Delancey's arm.

Detective Scott, who was looking on amazed, apparently unable to coordinate his movements quickly enough to help his superior officer, sprang to life. He grabbed the inspector's arm and pulled him to safety, then swung a hamlike fist, and struck Delancey full in the face.

The building superintendent staggered, made a half turn then pitched head-first through the window.

The sudden silence in the room was shattered by a piercing scream. The doctor, Holland and Cox rushed toward the broken window. Judge Wright paid no attention to them. Picking himself off the floor, he went slowly over to Margaret, and patted her trembling shoulder.

"Who needs a pill now?" he asked.

Margaret Sinclair tried to avert her eyes, but they remained riveted on the broken glass. She gasped with amazement, when she heard Holland's voice.

"Hey, Scott, give me a hand."

The bulky detective leaned out the window, then stepped over the ledge and disappeared. In a second, his head reappeared, then his shoulders. The girl gasped again when she saw him shove Delancey into the room.

"It's all right, my dear," Judge Wright soothed her. "He only fell three feet. Don't you remember the balcony outside?"

Dr. Pearson, seeing that Delancey was conscious, resumed his examination of the janitor's head. After looking him over, he motioned to the superintendent to come over.

"I'll get my own doctor to look me over," Delancey objected.

"Is that so?" Holland forced him into the chair. "You do as Pearson says."

"It's no longer important, Inspector," the judge intervened. "Just ask him one question."

"You ask it," Holland growled, "I'm listening."

The judge pursed his thin lips, sighed, then took the plunge.

"Will you tell the inspector why you knew no more about the attack than Scott or Cox?"

"Because I didn't."

"Then how did you know what they told me?" Holland roared at him. "You were still unconscious when I questioned them. Or were you? Go ahead, Doctor—take another look at that head of his!"

Dr. Pearson bent over Delancey. Judge Wright beckoned Holland to the window, raised the lower frame, and pointed to its bottom.

"Is that hair red?" he asked agitatedly.

Holland saw the light. He yelped and pounced on Delancey, but the doctor waved him aside.

"This wound could not cause unconsciousness," he announced. "It's a mere scratch."

"So when they left the room," Holland's voice rose in accusation, "you knocked out Cox, waited for that dumb Scott to come back and slugged him. You cut the cord on the window sash, carefully let it drop on your head, and faked unconsciousness, to make me think that Jackson did it!"

"Jackson did it!" Delancey reasserted.

"How could he slug all three of you?"

Judge Wright called his secretary.

"Come, my dear, we must go and comfort my daughter. Now that the inspector can prove that Delancey dropped the window on his red head after hitting Cox and the Homicide detective. I'm sure he has ways of getting a confession from him."

"You're right about that, Judge. But—his motive?"

AGAIN Judge Wright sighed, exasperated. He indicated Jackson.

"He can explain it to you. What more do you want from me? I found the victims, I caught your criminal, and showed you how to convict him. Aren't you satisfied?"

Jackson held out his still manacled hands to the judge.

"Thank you, Your Honor! My auditor swears that Delancey was embezzling funds, so the inspector will be satisfied. Delancey queered my first deal for the building, because he wanted it for himself. It'll be a gold mine, with the housing shortage. He bumped off Caldwell to keep him from buying it."

"That was after my poor son-in-law had confronted him with an earlier audit," Judge Wright interrupted. All the suppressed weariness and heartbreak looked out now from his sunken eyes, as he forced himself to continue. "Delancey could see no other way out. He killed my son-in-law, then when Caldwell found him, he committed the second murder. He thought he was clever enough to get the police to arrest Jackson for the double killings." He pressed his hands to his palpitating heart. "It's just as well that I'll have to disqualify myself. It will be one trial less before I can retire."

Delancey sank into the nearest chair, and glared at the judge as he wearily left the apartment. Inspector Holland removed the handcuffs from Jackson, and put them on Delancey's limp wrists.

His scowl changed to a compassionate smile, when he heard Miss Sinclair insist:

"Your pill, Judge! You've had too much excitement for one day."

A long knife was lifted and plunged

An Exciting Complete Novelet

By HENRY KUTTNER

DEATH

CHAPTER I

Not Staged

BEN HATCH, Special Agent for the Los Angeles Division of the F. B. I., walked right into murder that night at the Magic Window. The Window was a night-club, where the lights were dim so you couldn't add the figures on your check. It had other attractions—notably a large glass panel at the end of the long room, set up above floor level so you could get a good look. The waitresses stripped and posed behind it at intervals.

The real trouble started about ten minutes before Hatch arrived. Rudy Lannigan, an F. B. I. agent, was sitting in a booth, his hard, lean face impassive. It was difficult to see far in the dim green lighting. But near the bar, a stocky bald man in evening clothes was watching Lannigan with keen interest.

An F. B. I. Man Tries Some Sleuthing Tricks

hilt-deep into the girl's chest

WEARS A MASK

The ordinary crowd filled the Window. People out for fun. Young fellows, brooding over Life. Older men who had come to drink. Lovers, finding a rendezvous in the dim lighting. A man with a beard who looked like Orson Welles.

A gang of chorus-boy savages were cavorting around in the soft green glow in the center of the floor, doing a samba. They wore fuzzy black overall suits like bear pelts, and had grotesquely painted plastic masks over their faces. They jumped about like puppets and howled above the din of the orchestra.

A waitress came over to Lannigan's table. She was a slim, luscious blonde, looking as though she had been carefully poured into her black evening gown.

She caught her breath at sight of the man. Lannigan put out his hand to stop her as the girl tried to pass by him.

"Martini, Janna," he said softly. "Bring it yourself. Everything okay?"

when Sudden Murder Stalks the Magic Window!

There was sudden fear in her blue eyes. "Get out of here," she murmured. "I shouldn't have phoned you."

Lannigan looked at her impassively. "What made you change your mind in the middle of the call? You were going to tell me something. Then all of a sudden you started talking about something else. Who was listening in?"

Janna's red lips twisted. "I told you to forget it!"

"It took me only ten minutes to get here," the agent said. "I came right away. I figured I'd better. What have you got to tell me?"

"Nothing. I—I was wrong."

"There's a guy named Hatch meeting me here any minute," Lannigan said icily. "He's in the Narcotics Division. I phoned him to come along, just on a hunch."

"Narcotics Division," Janna repeated almost inaudibly. "I didn't say—"

"You didn't have to. I was in here two nights ago. Who gave you that snow?"

"I—it wasn't. It wasn't!"

"Sniffing dope, for the thrill of it!" Lannigan said disgustedly. "It's up Hatch's alley, so you'll have to talk to him." The agent's face softened a little. "Better break down and tell me about it, kid. You're not so tough as you think."

Janna shook her head angrily. "Just leave me alone!" she snaped, but there was a note of hysteria in her low voice. "I can take care of myself. I always have. You can't prove I phoned you!"

WITH that feeble spark of defiance she turned, vanishing into the dimness. At the end of the bar she waited for the order to be filled. The stocky man in evening clothes watched her with hooded eyes, filled with a cold, deadly fury and a curious sort of questioning. Janna apparently did not notice. With the Martini on a tray, she started back toward her customer.

One of the grotesque masked dancers lurched against her. The glass on its tray tilted precariously.

"Look out, stupid!" Janna snapped, though quietly.

The dancer, still keeping time with his feet, reached out to steady the glass. In the faint green glow no one saw a trickle of powder sift down from the man's palm into the Martini. He whirled away and was gone.

Janna went back to the table. Lannigan scowled at her.

"Sit down here," he said.

"No. I'm not supposed to sit with the customers. Keenan doesn't let us."

"Then he's changed his policy," Lannigan said. He gulped the Martini. "How'd you know I was a Government agent?"

"I—I—"

"Keenan told you, didn't he? What's he worried about? I come in here for a drink on my way home. That's all. So what did you need a Government agent for, eh?" The interrogative snapped like a whip-lash.

The masked dancers had finished their turn and disappeared toward the back. Keenan signaled the bartender, who placed a bottle and a glass before the Magic Window's owner.

"Something up?" the bartender asked, sotto voce.

Keenan didn't answer. He lit a cigar and turned to watch the Government man reflectively. Janna was shaking her head again. A fain gleam of satisfaction showed in the curve of Keenan's mouth.

Lannigan half rose, but the girl eluded him.

"It's time for my turn," she said defiantly. "Unless you want to arrest me!" But there was an undernote of nervousness in her bravado.

She went toward the back, with a quick glance at Keenan, who apparently didn't notice. Lannigan grunted and looked around. He wondered what was keeping Hatch. If this turned out to be a narcotic case, Hatch would be helpful. But maybe it wasn't. Except that two nights ago Janna certainly had been playing around with the stuff. Crazy little fool!

The blackout curtains hid the windows, so Lannigan could not see Ben Hatch's approach. The door swung open, and a short, wiry man of about thirty, with stiff red hair and vivid blue eyes, walked into the Magic Window. He discovered Lannigan instantly, and moved forward, sliding into the booth opposite the G-man.

" 'Lo, Lanny," he said. "I got your message. What's up?"

Lannigan didn't answer. He shivered, his hard, aquiline face without expression. Suddenly the lights went out.

"What the devil!" Hatch said, and looked toward the back, where a large square panel was lighting up.

It was the peep-show. A silhouette became visible through the glass. Two silhouettes.

One was that of a girl. She whirled to face the other, a figure hunched low, oddly blurred at the edges. The shadow of a long knife was lifted and plunged hilt-deep into the girl's chest. Her attacker jumped back and vanished from view.

The screen became transparent. The girl became clearly visible—a blonde, with a few scraps of chiffon tacked on to her here and there. They didn't conceal much. They didn't conceal the knife sticking out of her chest, or the blood crawling down the white skin of her body.

"That isn't staged," Hatch said tonelessly. "Come on!"

He exploded out of his seat and dived toward the back of the room. He could still see the girl standing behind the peep-show window, her body rigid, tense, arching with agony. Then she fell. Vanished. A spatter of applauding palms sounded.

Hatch went through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE," and found himself in a fair-sized room, cluttered with theatrical odds and ends. A man was lying crumpled beneath a switchboard panel—a slim chap in overalls. On Hatch's right a flight of steps led up to a platform with curtains all around it.

HATCH leaped to the stairs and yanked at the curtains. They slid aside. Something smashed down at his head.

He had a glimpse of the blonde's nearly nude body lying on the floor of the platform, a grotesque masked figure looming before him, and then a gun-butt crashed stunningly against his temple. He was falling. The attacker leaped away.

But Hatch had seen his assailant in time to detect the blow's full force. He fell heavily, painfully, on the steps, a jutting edge digging into his ribs. Fighting to retain consciousness, he saw the masked man yank open a door near the switchboard and vanish, slamming it behind him.

The room went dark. No—the lights were still on. But Hatch couldn't focus his vision. He tried to move limbs that were suddenly heavier than lead.

Where was Lannigan?

Hatch staggered to his feet. He lurched to the door, opened it, and saw a lighted hall, empty. Behind him voices rose in a crescendo, but Hatch did not turn. He saw an open window at the end of the passage. Had the killer made his escape that way?

Low voices came to him through a door at his side. Hatch slid down—he could hardly stand up, anyway, with his head throbbing in agony—and looked through the keyhole. What he saw made him jerk erect and try the knob. The door didn't open.

The voices beyond it ceased.

Hatch wasted no time. A light automatic came from inside his coat, and he shot out the lock, kicking the door open at the same time.

He lurched across the threshold into a well-furnished office, with a huge mahogany desk taking up half the wall space. Directly across from him was an open window. Through it came the sound of a car's retreating motor.

There were two men facing Hatch. Both wore the furry overall suits and plastic masks of the chorus boys. They dived at the special agent as he came through the doorway. One of them threw something—a paper-weight—that numbed Hatch's hand and sent the automatic spinning from his grasp. He was still almost out on his feet from the blow the killer had given him.

"Where's Lannigan?" he thought, as a heavy body crashed against his knees and brought him down.

His shoulders thudded against the door so that it swung shut. This was not the moment for speculation, though. The two masked men might be chorus boys, but they were plenty tough.

So was Ben Hatch. His short, wiry body went into action almost automatically. Hatch was still groggy, but his muscles reacted instinctively. Short, pistonlike blows hammered against yielding flesh. Hatch brought up his knees, kicking out furiously.

"Lannigan!" he yelled.

The blank, inhuman masks swayed before his eyes. His fists caromed off fuzzy fur—the overall suits. The salt, acrid odor of blood was strong in his nostrils.

It was like fighting robots—featureless, vicious, terrible. But these robots could be hurt. One of them doubled up, gasping and retching, as Hatch's hard fist sank into his midriff. The other sprang away. As the agent tried to rise, he saw a heavy shoe driving toward his temple. He dropped flat under it, caught the man's leg, and yanked. The breath was smashed from his lungs as his attacker fell on him.

Where was Lannigan?

Hatch felt his head being batted against the floor. In a minute it would explode. Gasping, almost out, he had sense enough to go limp. For an instant his assailant was tricked into relaxing his grip.

That was enough. Hatch's fist shot up, cracking against the man's jaw. It was not a hard enough blow to stun, but it gave Hatch a chance to roll free and slide head-first after the gun that had been knocked from his hand. He got it. The cool metal was comforting against his sweating palm.

He whirled, centering the automatic's muzzle between the two masked figures. Both were moving toward him.

"Hold it!" Hatch said.

He dragged himself up, his back against the wall, trip-hammers pounding inside his skull. The gun was fearfully heavy. He could scarcely hold it. But if he lost consciousness now it would be all up with him!

CHAPTER II

SECRET PANEL

THE masked men were closing in. Neither of them spoke, but a slight, imperceptible glance passed between them. They were going to rush, Hatch knew.

He bit his lip viciously. Briefly the pain cleared his brain. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"I said, hold it!" he snapped.

"What's going on here?" a new voice broke in.

The door, with its broken lock, stood open. Framed in the oblong was a man in evening clothes, stocky and harsh-faced, his bald head shining with sweat. He gestured at the masked men, and they drew back, to stand near the desk.

"Who're you?" Hatch said.

"Jen Keenan. I own the Window." Keenan stared at the automatic.

"Ben Hatch—F. B. I.," Hatch said. "These gorillas work for you?"

Strength was coming back to the agent now. With it came fury. He brushed back his bristling mop of red hair.

Keenan nodded. "They're not gorillas. Just what is this all about? One of my waitresses has been stabbed."

"I know," Hatch said. "Stabbed by a guy in a monkey-suit like these lads wear. He made his get-away through the hall outside."

"There's a window at the end of it," Keenan said. "And it's open."

"Yeah." Hatch's blue eyes were narrowed speculatively. "I happened to look through the keyhole into this room, and saw a hole in the wall closing up. Secret panel stuff. Maybe the murderer didn't go out a window. Maybe he went into the hole in the wall."

One of the men who had attacked Hatch pulled off his mask, revealing a swarthy Sicilian face with unshaved blue jowls.

"Look, Boss," he said. "We're waiting in here when this guy busts down the door and comes in waving a rod. Naturally we jump him."

"Waiting?" Hatch asked. "With the door locked? This your office, Keenan?"

The stocky man nodded. "Sure. What about it?"

"The door wasn't locked," the Sicilian said. "This cop musta made a mistake."

"I didn't make any mistake about that secret panel," Hatch said grimly. "Open it up, Keenan. And explain why your thugs were fooling around with it."

Keenan tried to look angry. "That the truth, Joe? You been watching through keyholes too?"

The Sicilian took the cue instantly. "Yeah. I seen you open it, so I—"

"You got curious," Keenan finished. "Okay. Think you can open it again?"

Silently Joe went to the desk, manipulated a hidden spring, and stepped back as the heavy piece of furniture slid out at an angle. There was a black gap in the wall.

Keenan went over and switched on a light. Hatch followed him. He looked down into a small square room, quite empty, with unbroken bare walls, lit by a single bulb in the ceiling.

"There's no way out of it," Keenan said. "You can look around if you like. The boys shouldn't have been fooling around. Hardly anybody knows about this hide-out."

"Hide-out?"

"I got enemies." Keenan smiled. "It's a sort of bomb shelter—just in case."

Hatch nodded. "Okay." He turned to the other masked figure. "Let's see what you look like."

The second chorus man had a sallow, unhealthy, thin face, and untidy yellow hair. He evaded Hatch's eyes.

"Look, Mr. Hatch," Keenan repeated. "One of my girls has been stabbed. How about it?"

"I heard somebody run past in the hall, just before you busted in," Joe broke in.

Hatch rubbed his jaw. "Yeah. I don't think you guys did it. The killer had a gun. And you'd have used a gun on me if you'd had one. Still, I'm not taking any chances. Keenan, will your little pals stick around?"

"Sure," the stocky man said. "Won't you, boys?"

The boys nodded sullenly. Hatch remembered Lanningan. He told Keenan to call the local police and, holstering his gun, pushed through the crowd into the night-club proper.

It was seething with confusion, but Lannigan, Hatch saw, still sat motionless at his table.

LANNIGAN kept on sitting there, rigid, and slumped back with his arms dangling at his sides, even when Hatch, his pulses pounding, bent to peer into the agent's face. Lannigan's eyes were open, the pupils dilated. There was a small polished chromium tray on the table, on which the Martini had been served. Hatch held this to Lannigan's open mouth and drew it away unfogged.

He lit a match before Lannigan's eyes. There was no contraction of the pupils.

Hatch felt his stomach turn over. He touched the corpse's chest, felt the muscles flaccid and loose. Then something made his eyes widen. He slid his palm inside Lannigan's shirt.

The dead man's heart was beating!

Under his hand the slow beat hesitated and stopped. Had it been merely imagination? Hatch didn't think so, but he made certain it was not some gadget that he had felt.

Presently he stepped back and stared at the body, his eyes clouding. He had known Lannigan for a long time. It was tough for Rudy Lannigan to go out like this—dying even as Hatch had sat opposite to him in the dim-lit booth.

Poison? The olive in the Martini glass was untouched, and there was a tiny puddle of gin and vermouth left. Hatch smelled the glass, but the odor of the drink was all he could catch. The Martini's strong taste must have effectually disguised the poison.

There was a noise from the back room. Hatch went there, shaking his head to clear it of the pounding ache. The man in overalls had recovered. Surrounded by a group of the club's performers, with Keenan in the front row, puffing at a cigar and stroking his bald head, he was gulping a drink someone had given him.

Hatch shouldered forward. "Let's have it," he said curtly. "What happened to you?"

The overalled man looked at Keenan, who nodded.

"Yeah. What happened, Bottley? Spit it out."

"That guy must have been hiding on the platform," Bottley said. "Behind the curtains."

"You mean the murderer?"

Bottley shuddered, his wrinkled face twisting. "Yes. He did kill Janna, then? I was at the switchboard, working the lights, when she peeled and went up on the platform. I worked the switches, same as always, and then this guy comes rushing off the platform and swats me over the head with a gun."

Hatch narrowed his blue eyes. "He was wearing that screwy outfit—false face and all?"

"He was. Like the rest of the dancers."

"I get it. Our little friend hid on the platform, behind the curtains, stabbed Janna, jumped out and socked Bottley. He worked fast, all right! Then he heard me at the door, and dived back on the platform just in time to hide."

"I phoned the police," Keenan said. "They'll be along directly."

Hatch pulled him away from the others.

"Listen, Keenan," he said. "There's a dead man out in the club. Poisoned."

The cigar jerked. "Yeah?" Keenan said.

"Yeah. He was a Federal agent, too. Man named Lannigan. Take a look. You can see him from the door."

Keenan obeyed and came back with his eyes hooded.

"I see. This'll be sweet publicity for the Window, I don't think."

"Ever seen Lannigan before?"

"I have. He's been coming here off and on for a week."

"Tonight—what happened?"

Keenan's harsh face remained impassive. "I didn't see him come in, but I noticed him at that booth."

"Janna was with him for a while," someone said.

The club owner's teeth clamped with soft savagery on his cigar. "That's right," he said. "She served him a drink."

The bartender who had interrupted Keenan before spoke again.

"I served the drink to Janna. But it wasn't poisoned."

Hatch looked at the man. "She took it straight to him?"

"Yes, sir. She did."

"You saw that? She didn't stop anywhere?"

The bartender shrugged. "No. Except one of the dancers bumped into her, but it didn't spill the drink."

"There it is," Hatch said. "All wrapped up. Our friend the murderer again, disguised as one of your chorus boys, Keenan. He managed to drop poison into that Martini."

KEENAN didn't say anything.

"Headquarters will have the rest of that Martini analyzed," Hatch went on, "but I've a hunch it was calabar bean—African ordeal poison. When you take that, you stay conscious to the last, but you can't move. You're paralyzed. And your heart keeps beating for a while after you're dead. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Not a thing," Keenan grunted. "You figure it was one of the dancers, eh? Want to question 'em?"

Hatch shook his head. "The killer just used that disguise. You had extra monkey-suits and masks, didn't you? I thought so. Well, in that dim light one extra man wouldn't be noticed."

He hesitated. What next? Who had killed Lannigan, and why? Why had Janna called the Federal man to this rendezvous with murder, as Lannigan had told him she had done? A hundred questions raced through Hatch's mind, but none could be answered yet.

The siren of a squad car sounded outside.

The next ten minutes were a swift blur of questions and answers. A sergeant drew Hatch aside.

"Is this Federal business?"

"An F. B. I. man's been murdered," Hatch said grimly. "That's our business, all right. But you'd better take over. I've a few ideas I want to follow up. Will you send that Martini down to the Department to be analyzed?"

He went in search of Keenan, who was in his office, sitting imperturbably behind his desk listening to the tinkle of an old-fashioned music-box.

"I collect 'em," he explained, showing the little cube to Hatch. "What now?"

Hatch sat on the desk's corner. "Who was this girl Janna?"

Keenan found another cigar, clipped and lit it.

"Janna Duquesne," he said. "I hired her two weeks ago. Don't know anything about her, otherwise."

"Let's have her address."

Keenan opened a drawer of his desk, took out a card file, and copied an address on a note pad.

"Here," he said. "I think she lives with her sister. Janna used to work for an escort service. That's where I met her. I liked her looks and offered her a job."

Hatch didn't comment on the fact that, a moment ago, Keenan had said he didn't know anything about Janna Duquesne. He pocketed the address, grunted, and turned to the door. There was a faint touch of mockery in the low voice that followed him out.

"Good luck, G-man."

The address Keenan had given was a small frame bungalow on Serrano, a quiet street where tall palms masked the sidewalk lamps into dim obscurity. Hatch killed his motor and let the light coupé slide silently in to the curb. A few other cars were parked along the block. That might mean nothing, or a lot. He got out, went quietly to the bungalow's porch, and hesitated.

There was no light from within. Janna's sister might be out. Maybe. Hatch wished he could think clearly. His head was still throbbing. He rubbed his flaming thatch and tried the bell.

The sound rang shrilly, disturbingly, through the dark house.

Then Hatch saw that the door was ajar—not much, but a significant dark line showed. Instantly he had swung it open, stepped in, and closed it behind him. Or, rather, he tried to close it. The door had expanded, and grated in protest as he forced it into its frame.

Hatch's eyes narrowed in the darkness. Someone—some intruder—had left the door ajar, so it wouldn't stick in the jamb and slow down his get-away. Unless he'd already made a get-away!

What next? Hatch wished desperately that he had a flashlight. A blaze of light from the electric fixtures would betray him to the killer, who might be waiting for just a move. All this on the assumption that someone was actually in the house—someone who didn't belong there.

A slight sound warned Hatch. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the obscurity. He made out a dim rectangle—a doorway. Beyond it was darkness, and from that darkness came an almost inaudible rustle that made the short hairs lift on Hatch's neck, though he could not have said why.

He slipped like a shadow across the threshhold and flattened himself against the wall by the doorway, his gun cold against a sweating palm. There was silence.

Dim light came through the window. It revealed the body of a girl, a blonde like Janna, slim and pretty, lying motionless on the faded carpet. She was wearing a negligée over pajamas, and there were dark splotches on her throat—bruises that had been made by fingers. But her chest moved slowly. The killer had not had time to finish his job.

And the murderer was still in the room with Hatch. The Federal man knew that, with a vivid certainty. There was the feeling of another presence!

CHAPTER III

Masked Gang

NOTHING was visible to Hatch but the girl's body, and the lighter rectangle that marked the doorway. He could not see the murderer. The reverse was equally true.

And the killer dared not fire at the girl, though no doubt he had a gun. The flash would have revealed his location to Hatch.

Silence. A breeze rustled scratchily through the fronds of palm trees outside. Hatch closed his eyes and opened them again after a moment or two. But the darkness was still too intense for him to make out anything more.

The girl on the floor groaned and opened her eyes. Instantly a low whisper cut through the blackness.

"Don't shoot, fella. She's all right. I haven't hurt her."

Hatch didn't answer. He was trying to discover just where that voice came from.

"I thought Ruth knew something," it went on tonelessly, "but she doesn't. I'd have killed her if she did. But she doesn't know anything."

Something hurtled through the room, crashed against the window with a splintering of glass. For a second Hatch swung toward it. His gun blasted. Then he realized that the killer had thrown a chair through the window.

It was too late then. A heavy body hurtled against him, sent him sprawling over some piece of furniture. Struggling to swing his automatic into line, Hatch was in time to see a figure dart through the doorway and vanish. He bounded up.

"Stay here!" he said to the girl. "I'm going after that killer!"

There was no time to make sure she understood. Hatch leaped into the front room and saw the door standing ajar. He plunged on to the porch, gun ready.

A black sedan was already lurching away from the curb. Its engine roared as it swung

on two wheels around the first corner, fifty feet away. It was gone.

Pursuit, Hatch felt pretty sure, would be useless. The killer would abandon his car almost immediately, and lose himself in a maze of black alleys. Meantime, Janna's sister would have been unguarded.

He found her hunched over the telephone, trembling as she tried to dial Police Headquarters.

"Don't bother about that, Miss Duquesne," Hatch said.

She stared at him, eyes wide with fright. Hatch showed her his credentials.

"Now—how do you feel?" he asked. "Hurt bad?"

She touched the ugly black marks on her white throat.

" No. You came along before he had a chance to do much."

Without invitation, Hatch lowered himself into a chair. The girl had switched on the lights, and he saw that the room was clean, neat, ordinary, and feminine. Janna's sister was almost a ringer for the dead girl, except that her face was softer, rounder, and weaker. There still was fear in the dark eyes.

"Who was that man?" Hatch asked.

"I don't know," she said, without hesitation. "I got out of bed when the bell rang, and there was a man on the porch wearing a mask, and a fuzzy sort of suit."

Hatch nodded. So the killer was still wearing his Magic Window floor show get-up. A convenient disguise, easily donned or discarded at a moment's notice.

"He switched off the light and forced me back into the bedroom," Ruth Duquesne went on. "He didn't say anything. He just choked me. That's all I know."

Hatch took out a pack of cigarettes and held it out.

"No? Well—I think you do know something, Miss Duquesne. Something important to that killer."

She shook her head. "Honestly, I don't." Her red lips trembled. She pulled the negligée closer about her.

Hatch's blue eyes went bleak and dangerous.

"Listen," he said grimly. "That man intended to kill you. I stopped him. He didn't dare shoot you, because I'd have fired at the flash. So what did he do? He waited till you woke up, and said—apparently to me—that if you had known anything, he'd have killed you. That was a warning to you—and you got it, all right. A warning to keep your mouth shut."

She looked at him like a bird fascinated by a snake. But her mouth was stubbornly tight.

"Don't be a fool," Hatch said. "He won't trust you to keep quiet. He'll be back. Did you know your sister was murdered tonight?"

THE thrust was intentionally brutal. Ruth Duquesne shrank back, the color flooded her cheeks, and then she went ghost-white. Her hand flew up.

"No!" she said. "No!"

"Somebody stuck a knife in Janna Duquesne's heart," Hatch said. "He won't hesitate to do the same to you. If you talk, I'll see that you're protected. Otherwise—" He stood up and began to walk toward the door.

Ruth leaped after him, dragging at his arm.

"I'm sorry! I didn't know! Please come back! Janna—"

Hatch got her a glass of water from the kitchen and waited until the girl had calmed.

"Okay," he said at last. "Now what's the answer?"

Ruth was shivering. "I don't know. Honestly! I'd tell you if I did, but . . . There's only one thing."

"Well?"

"For the past few weeks Janna's been nervous. Once she said we'd soon have plenty of money, and then shut up like a clam. But—but there wasn't anything else."

"Could be you might have some information without knowing it," Hatch said. "Suppose you answer a few questions."

She was willing to talk. Ruth Duquesne worked for an escort service, had been working there since coming to Los Angeles from Iowa three years before. Things had fallen off a lot since the war, though. Men didn't have to phone an escort bureau to find a girl to take dancing or to a show. A month ago Janna had joined her sister, running away from home to come to California. She, too, had tried the escort bureau, but only for a week.

"Keenan took her out, eh?"

Ruth frowned. "Why, no."

"He said he did—and offered her a job at the Mirror."

The girl looked puzzled. "That wasn't the way of it. Somebody told her to go see Mr. Keenan."

"Who?" Hatch asked quickly.

"One of her escort service dates. Wait, I've got his name and address here somewhere. Ruth always left those with me before she went out on dates. Just in case. Sometimes the men try to get funny. But Janna could take care of herself."

Hatch lifted an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. He watched Ruth go to a secretary in one corner and fumble through copies of old movie magazines, letters, and papers.

"Here," she said. "This is the name of the man—Dyke Carnevan. A man from Des Moines who wanted to kick over the traces."

"What do you know about him? Anything?"

"No," Ruth said. "I don't even know if Janna ever saw him after that once."

"And he told her to see Keenan, uh? Look, you two kids lived here together. Didn't Janna ever say anything you thought was funny? That made you wonder?"

Ruth bit at a fingernail, scowling in concentration.

"N-no. Except . . . Oh, that wasn't anything."

"Let's have it," Hatch said.

"Well, she got in awful late a few nights ago, and I could tell she was excited. I thought she was tight. She'd been on a party. That was funny. She wasn't tight at all, but she acted like it."

The G-man's mouth hardened. "Did you notice her eyes?"

"Her eyes? I don't understand."

"Reefer party," Hatch said. "Or worse, maybe. What'd she say? Mention any names?"

Ruth nodded. "Just this Dyke Carnevan—the client who told her to go to the Magic Window. She said he'd met Mr. Keenan in Des Moines a year and a half ago. That was all, really. She kept repeating it and laughing a lot."

"And that's all?"

"I'm afraid it is. I—I wish—"

Hatch stood up, rubbing his jaw. "I'll phone for somebody to guard you here. But first I'd like to look over your sister's stuff."

Silently Ruth led the way into the bedroom and pointed to a chest of drawers. She watched as Hatch swiftly went through them. He found nothing until, at the bottom of the lowest drawer, his eye lit on a magazine lying face down under a pile of feminine toggery. He drew it out—a true-detective magazine, with a slip of paper sticking out from the pages. Something was scribbled on that paper—a few words only.

He's a masked murderer

That was all. Hatch shoved the magazine into his pocket and turned. He was just in time to hear Ruth scream, and see her go down, in the doorway, under the impact of a gun-butt that was swung viciously against her temple. The figure behind her was grotesquely masked and wearing a fuzzy overall suit. He jumped back out of sight as Hatch lunged toward him.

HURDLING the girl's body, the G-man halted on the threshold, as he saw the masked man standing across the room, looming against the front doorway, signaling with one furry arm!

Hatch went for his gun. The strange figure hurtled toward him, and behind came others—two, three, four—disgorged from the darkness outside the house.

A sound behind him made Hatch leap aside, but too late. More of the masked figures had entered through the bedroom window. He went down under an avalanche of attackers, fighting desperately. The automatic was wrenched from his grasp.

He slugged, kicked, cursed, and fought against the gag that was forced into his mouth, but it was useless. There were at least six of the masked men. Hatch relaxed only when he lay bound and motionless on the floor. As though by some prearranged signal, his captors lifted him, concealing him between them, and went out of the house.

There was a light truck outside. Apparently it had slid up with the engine off, a trick Hatch himself had used. The agent was carried to the back of the truck and shoved in roughly; five of the masked thugs followed. The sixth swiftly stripped off his disguise, tossed it into the lap of one of his fellows, and ran to take his place in the driver's seat. He was a man Hatch had never seen before.

The truck swung forward, the tires humming on the road as it picked up speed. Inside the back of the truck was only darkness, and silent menace. Hatch furtively tried to loosen his bonds, but could not. One of his captors used a flashlight which blazed blindingly into the G-man's eyes. "Don't try it," a low voice said. "You can't get away."

The flashlight was turned off. Hatch lay motionless, thinking hard. As the truck lurched, his face smacked painfully against the floor of the light, closed delivery truck.

Then the pieces began to fall into place in Hatch's mind. His wiry body tensed with sudden fury. He knew, now, what lay behind these killings.

Time dragged on. The truck, Hatch guessed, was heading into the Hollywood hills, by way of one of the canyons.

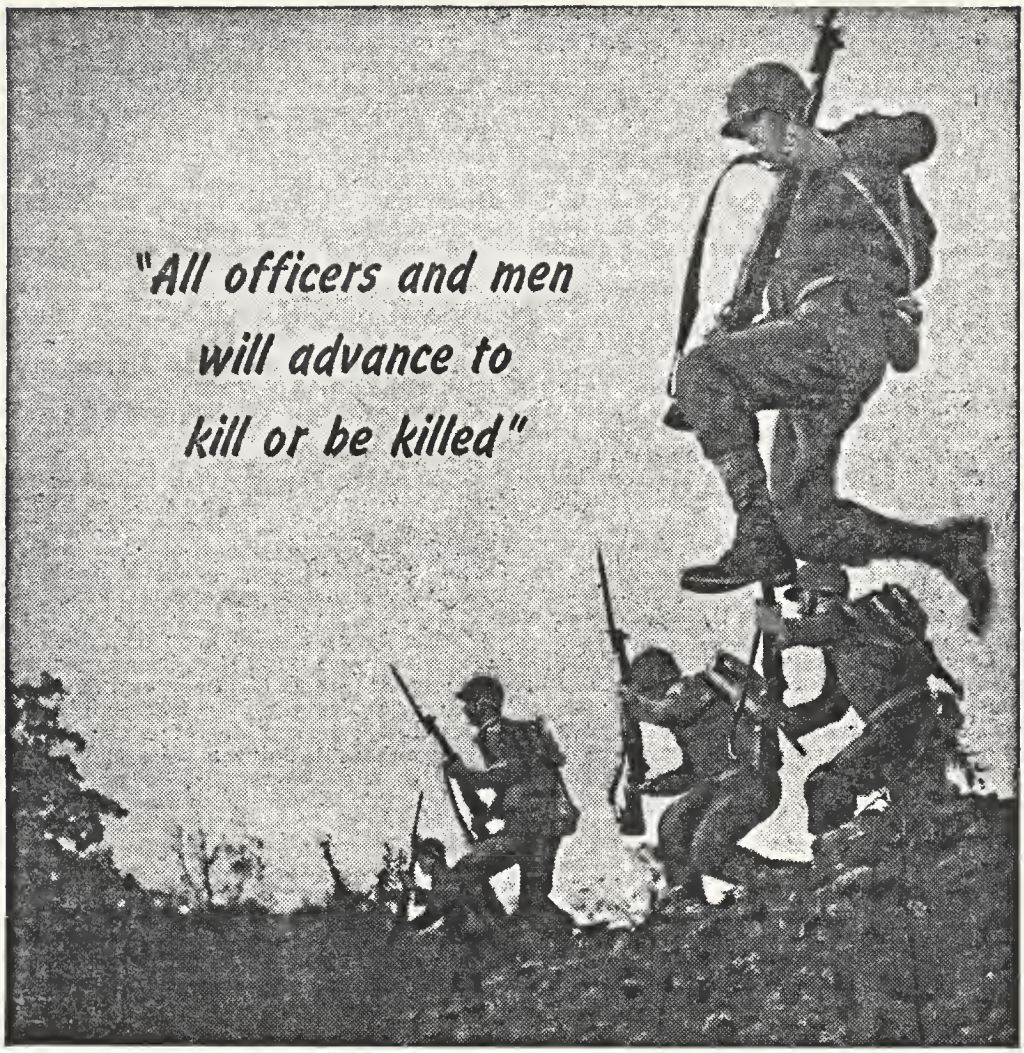
After about half an hour it slowed and stopped. The back doors were swung open. Hatch was carried out.

The moon had risen—a full moon, bright and lambent, silvering the California night. The truck was standing in a driveway that ran from the road along the side of a bungalow to a garage.

Hatch managed to look around as he was carried. This was, apparently, what was left of a hill subdivision that had flopped. There were no other houses near, and the distant ones Hatch saw on the neighboring slopes were dark, empty. He was carried toward the open doors of the garage. A lantern swung from a beam there, casting a pale yellow glow.

Hatch was dumped roughly in the center

[*Turn to page 68*]



THIS IS NO DREAMED-UP HEADLINE—no "tone poem" conceived on an inspired typewriter. It's the way the army explains the command "Fix bayonets—charge!" Only the Infantry has it put to them in these words. As one doughboy said:

"I'll remember those eleven words the rest of my life."

Remember? How can he forget them? They describe the climax of the Infantryman's assault—they describe the most cold-blooded action on a battlefield. Yet Infantry officers and men have advanced, countless times, to kill or be killed . . . at Saratoga . . . at New Orleans . . . the Argonne . . . New Guinea . . . Salerno. There's no rescinding this order—no retreating—no nothing but *plain killing*.

Right now, the men of the Infantry are advancing—advancing to the order of "kill or be killed." Remember this the next time you see a doughboy on furlough. Remember this the next time you almost forget to write that letter. Remember it till your dying day. You can't pay the doughboy back—but at least you can be forever mindful of *his* role in this fight for freedom. His last command may be to "Fix bayonets—charge!"

"Keep your eye on the Infantry—THE DOUGHBOY DOES IT!"

of the floor, on a dark stain that had once been oil, long since dried. One of the masked figures took the gag from the agent's mouth. Hatch coughed and choked, his tongue feeling like a dry, swollen sponge.

When he could speak, he said sharply:

"Joe!"

One of the bizarre figures automatically turned a masked face toward him—and paused. There was the sound of a muffled oath.

"Is Keenan here?" Hatch said. "I want to see him."

"Very well," a low voice said. "Here I am, Hatch."

Jen Keenan walked into the garage, chewing a cigar, his bald head yellow under the lamplight. His face was set in harsh lines of brutal triumph. He jerked his head at Joe.

"Okay," he ordered. "Get the boys busy. We haven't much time, and I want to talk to this wise guy."

"Right, Boss."

Joe led the six masked figures out of the garage. They went toward the truck which, Hatch saw, was parked in the driveway by a side door of the house.

Lying flat on his back, bound and helpless, he looked around. There was nothing in the garage that could help him. The lantern was out of his reach, and though the joists of the walls were studded with dozens of nails and hooks, placed there by the former tenant, he could not reach them.

A bundle of what looked like canvas was up on a beam; ropes hung from it. On Hatch's left was a window, which had no glass in it. There was a hook on each side of the frame, and from one of these an old, patched inner tube hung disconsolately, its days of usefulness long since over. But the cement floor of the garage had been cleared, and held only dirt.

KEENAN stood staring down at his prisoner. Then, deliberately, he kicked Hatch in the side.

"Wise bird," he said, his voice coldly vicious. "I figured I'd better find out just how much you know. And how much the Feds know."

Hatch glanced past Keenan, down the moonlit driveway. The masked thugs, he saw, were carrying boxes out of the house and loading them into the truck.

"Sure," he said wearily. "I'll tell you what I know, punk. We'll trade information."

Keenan laughed. "What'll you do with it?"

"Janna Duquesne found out about your dope racket," Hatch said. "She was at a coke party a couple of nights ago. Afterwards she got scared and phoned Lannigan at Division Headquarters. You overheard her phoning, and she knew it. That's right, uh?"

"A friend of mine heard her," Keenan said. "He told me about it."

"So you killed her."

"I don't kill women!" the gangster blazed suddenly. "Listen, Fed. I got on top the hard way, by knocking down men tougher than I am. But I don't kill women."

"No? Maybe not. You just peddle the stuff to 'em."

Keenan shrugged.

"You've been keeping dope in that secret room in your office," Hatch went on. "Your yarn about using it for a hide-out was pretty weak. There wasn't any ventilation in that room. The walls were perfectly blank. It wasn't a hide-out. It was a store-room."

"Well?"

"After Janna phoned Lannigan, you had a couple of your thugs start clearing out the store-room. Only Lannigan showed up quick—too quick for you. By that time you'd threatened Janna and scared her into keeping her mouth shut, but you were still afraid Lannigan might investigate. So you moved the dope through your office window into the light truck that was waiting outside. And the truck brought it here. By the time I got around, the job was almost done, and Janna and Lannigan were both dead."

"Not my doing," Keenan said. "I'm not kill-crazy. With me it's business. Like rubbing you out because I have to."

"Who's Dyke Carnevan?" Hatch asked.

"Who?" But the gangster's gaze had flickered momentarily.

"Carnevan. The man who told you to give Janna Duquesne a job."

Sudden, raging fury blazed in Keenan's eyes. He ripped out a string of searing curses.

"Carnevan, eh? I'll tell you who he is! The bozo who messed up my whole racket, that's who! Left me holding the bag! That's what I get for stringing along with—" he spat—"Carnevan!"

"Who is he?"

(Continued on page 74)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of THRILLING DETECTIVE, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944. State of New York, County of New York, SS. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THRILLING DETECTIVE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street New York, N. Y.; Editor, Harvey Burns, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1944. Eugene Wechsler. My commission expires March 30th, 1945.

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A True Crime Story

The stranger wore a black mask

THE MAN WHO TOOK A WALK

By SAMUEL MINES

Three persons confess to a crime that never took place!

HYSTERIA is one of the more puzzling aspects of crime. Under its influence witnesses may see and hear things they never did, they may even confess to crimes they never committed. This may have been more common in earlier and more superstitious times. Certainly one of the most intriguing cases of its kind occurred in the late Sixteen-hundreds in England.

There was a certain elderly man named William Harrison who lived in Campden, Gloucestershire, and who served as agent for the Viscountess Campden, lady of the manor.

One of his jobs was to collect rents from the farms and homes on manor land. He was sober, reliable and trustworthy. In the manner of English families, he had worked for the Campdens more than fifty years.

He left Campden one afternoon to walk to Charringworth for rents that were due. He did not come back. By ten that night, the Viscountess became anxious and sent a serv-

ant named John Perry to find out what had happened to him. Perry too, did not return.

With the first light, the Viscountess routed out Edward Harrison, the missing man's son, and he took the road to Charringworth. A few miles out he met Perry returning. The servant was pale, excited, and his clothing looked as though he had been in a fight. He said he had spent the night searching fruitlessly for the old man.

Search parties were made up and the fields and woods were beaten in earnest. A clue turned up almost immediately. An old woman picking herbs turned in a hat and a comb such as men wore in the powdered wigs of the day. They were identified as William Harrison's and the old woman's testimony that she had found them lying in the road, plus bloodstains and knife marks on them made the whole business begin to look bad.

Under severe questioning, John Perry's story broke down. Instead of searching all night, as he had first claimed, he now said that he had become afraid of the dark, had sneaked back home and into a stable where he had slept until nearly dawn before he got up and out on the road again where William Harrison had met him.

The more he was questioned, the more hysterically frightened he became. He began making up all sorts of stories to account for Harrison's disappearance. One story was that a tinker whose name he actually gave, had murdered Harrison. The tinker was arrested but had a hole-proof alibi and was released. Next Perry named a local servant as a murderer but this individual also fortunately had an alibi, making Perry a doubly bad guesser.

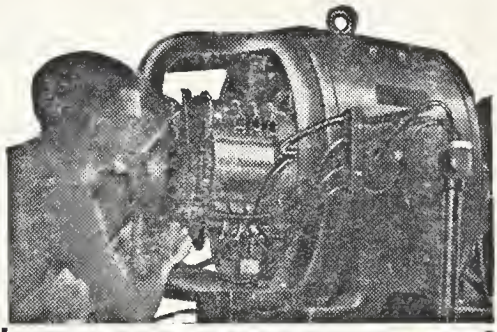
A week in prison gave Perry's imagination time to work and he came up with a third story about a stranger in a black mask who had killed Harrison, threatened Perry with a gun, and forced him to hide Harrison's body in a bean-rick. He even pointed out the bean-rick which was torn apart, but nothing was found except beans.

Finally the desperate man put the finger on his own mother, Joan Perry, and his brother Richard. These two, he said, had murdered Harrison for his money. He had seen the murder done, but had not taken part in it. The body had been thrown into the village mill pond.

THE pond was dragged, then drained, but no body was in it. Baffled, the local constabulary nevertheless put all three Perrys on trial. They confessed to the murder of William Harrison.

In the absence of *corpus delieti* the judge held that too much doubt surrounded the case and threw it out. However, the three were at once rearrested and brought before another judge. Meanwhile, having thought it

[*Turn page*]



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over, they decided to plead "not guilty." But it was too late. They were convicted, sentenced to death and promptly hanged by the neck until dead.

And so the case seemed to end and everyone was satisfied. Two years passed. Then one fine day William Harrison, slightly the worse for wear, but very much alive, came hobbling down the village street as big as life and twice as natural.

To the flabbergasted natives he told an amazing story. The evening he had walked from Campden to Charringworth he had been held up by two highwaymen who had knocked him out, tied him on a horse, carried him to the seacoast and sold him to a short-handed ship captain.

The ship sailed for Smyrna where the captain, not anxious to return to England with his shanghaied seaman, sold him to the Turks.

For a year and a half, William Harrison had been a slave in a Turkish household. He was fairly well treated, though he complained of the food. Then his master died and, dying, generously freed all his slaves. William Harrison found himself at loose ends in Smyrna.

For some time he eked out a precarious living doing odd jobs, then he stowed away on a ship bound for Lisbon, Portugal. Eventually he had made his way back to England and walked cross country home to Campden.

The story itself was probable in most respects. Yet every time he told it, he contradicted himself in certain particulars so that doubts began to rise in the minds of the listeners. Some were outspoken enough to say that the whole story was phony and that in their opinion, Harrison had never even been out of the country.

In that case where had he been? There was no question of embezzlement, or fleeing to avoid exposure, for his accounts balanced perfectly. Then, too, if he had been in the country all the time, he would have heard of the Perry case which had caused a turmoil, and it was inconceivable that a man so devoutly humble and religious as William Harrison would have let three innocent people go to their deaths for a wholly fictitious murder.

This particular puzzle was never cleared up. It is entirely possible that the contradictions in his story were merely the vagaries of an old man's memory, and an old man who had gone through an extremely bad time. It is understandable that many things might have become hazy in his mind. For lack of motivation, therefore, we may as well accept his story more or less in its entirety.

The case of the Perrys, however, is more baffling, and is an extreme example of the type of hysteria which creates demons in man's minds. John Perry, it is obvious,

(Concluded on page 80)

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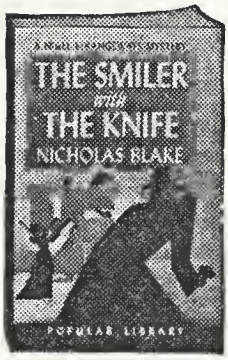

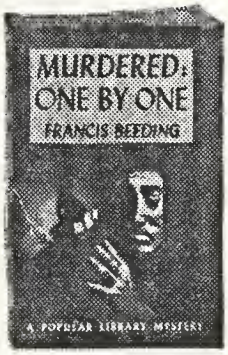

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DEATH WEARS A MASK

(Continued from page 68)

Keenan took out a gun. "I'm saving this load for him, if he's fool enough to show up around me again. The truck's full," he added, glancing toward it. "So we'll roll. This merchandise goes out of town tonight. As for you, Fed, I told you I'm not kill-crazy. But you've found out too much. It's got to be this way. And don't worry about Carnevan!" He knelt beside Hatch and carefully tested the prisoner's bonds. "You'll do."

He took a corrugated metal ball, the size of a grapefruit, from his pocket, and stood fingering it, his teeth bared in a grin.

"I'll say good-by. And leave this with you. In five minutes after I set it, you'll go to blazes."

The cement floor was cold against Hatch's back.

"Wait, Keenan," he said. "What about Lannigan, and Janna Duquesne?"

"What about them? I didn't kill them."

"I know you didn't," Hatch said. "That's where you made your mistake—getting excited. Janna wasn't talking to Lannigan about you. She didn't know you peddled dope. She had some other information—information about a killer. She told Lannigan, but the murderer was too quick. He had disguised himself as one of your chorus boys, and managed to stick a knife in Janna and slip poison in Lannigan's Martini. Then he made his getaway."

Keenan shrugged impatently. "Get to the end of it. I'm in a hurry."

"That was what gave you the idea of using the same disguise on your thugs when they came after me. Ruth Duquesne saw only one man when you captured me at her place. She thinks it's the killer. But listen, Keenan! The murderer made one attempt already tonight to bump off Ruth Duquesne. He'll make another. And she's lying there in her front room unconscious!"

Keenan shook his head in mock sympathy. "Too bad! But maybe Ruth knows more than she should, too. It's nothing to me if she gets a knife in her gizzard. If the Feds are looking for that killer, they won't have time to check up on me too close."

He turned and called to his men.

"Start her up! We've got five minutes."

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN KILLER

MASKED thugs clambered into the truck. The truck engine purred. Keenan pulled a pin out of the bomb and laid it carefully on the cement floor. He went out hurriedly, closing the garage doors and locking them.

"So long, G-man!" his voice said, from outside. "Good luck!"

But Hatch was already busy. Five minutes. That was all. And he was bound and trussed like a mummy. His hands were tied together in front of him, but the knots were hard and tight.

The window? He might manage to clamber out, but he couldn't get far enough away from the garage to be safe before the bomb went off. Maybe he could throw the grenade, though. There must be some way!

He heard the truck start up, its tires screeching on gravel.

Hatch rolled to the bomb and picked it up in his bound hands. There was no way of making the thing harmless now, of course. Gripping it carefully between his palms, he got his back against the wall and edged himself up, splinters digging painfully into his skin. But at last he was standing before the window.

His heart sank. The ground outside was overgrown with weeds and underbrush. With his hands fettered as they were, he couldn't throw the bomb more than a few feet.

Thirty feet away was the road and, far beyond it, the distant, sprawling lights of Hollywood.

The inner tube dangled from its hook on one side of the window. That was it! The inner tube! It was a long chance, but the only one. And it might work.

Hatch still held the bomb between his palms. Keeping his balance with difficulty, he leaned over, gripped the rubber between his teeth, and managed to hook the tube's free end over the hook on the other side of the window. Now the double loop of thick rubber hung across the empty window frame, like a sling-shot.

How many minutes had passed? Hatch couldn't guess. It seemed like half an hour at least. With aching, fumbling fingers he got the bomb in place. Bracing himself, he leaned back, stretching the inner tube with its deadly missile. If the rubber broke. . . . There was sweat on Hatch's cheeks.

Then he saw the truck swing into view on the road thirty feet away, its lights probing out through the night. Instantly he released the catapult.

Whup! The rubber sang as it snapped forward. Hatch went over backward, thumping his head painfully on the cement. Briefly he imagined that the roaring explosion be heard was only within his skull. The ear-shattering detonation blew in one side of the garage, and that convinced Hatch that his trick had worked.

Gasping, he dragged himself to what was left of the window. The bomb had exploded, all right. Probably within a few feet of the truck. And that grenade must have been loaded with super-dynamite!

[*Turn page*]

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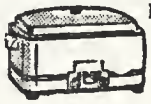

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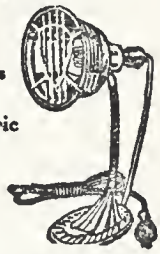

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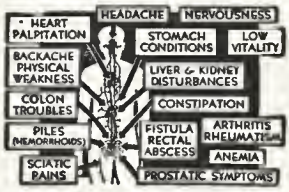

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Hatch went to work on his bonds. There were plenty of nails here and there, pounded into the joists, and it did not take long for him to wear through a few strands of rope. After that it was comparatively easy.

Free at last, he went cautiously to the scene of the explosion. What he found there convinced him that Keenan was dead. So were his thugs. The truck itself was scrap metal.

What about Ruth Duquesne? The thought lanced into Hatch's mind. She might still be unconscious, at the mercy of the killer, who was almost certain to return.

The G-man found a gun, wiping it clean of the blood that stained it. The only way to get back to Hollywood was to walk, until he found a car. He took a short-cut down the hillside, brambles clawing at his clothing, whipping at his face. But presently he found a more frequented road, and stopped the first car that came along.

The boy who drove it gulped when he saw Hatch's identification. He wanted to come along, but Hatch dropped him at the first gas station and shoved down the throttle. He was in a hurry.

The street lamps blended into a blur. As he drove, he drew the true-crime magazine out of his pocket and flipped the pages, precariously snatching glances at it. One page was marked. A picture was outlined, that of a man with a beak of a nose, thick, fleshy lips, and a mop of light hair. The caption read:

Charlie Doppler,
Wanted for Murder and Robbery of a
Federal Bank

Doppler. Hatch knew of the man. A shrewd, cunning, vicious killer, whose flaming guns had blazed a trail of murder through the Midwest. A man trying to wear Dillinger's shoes. A woman-killer. He had been captured a year and a half ago in Des Moines.

DES MOINES! And Keenan had been in Des Moines a year and a half ago.

The authorities had never recovered the eighty thousand in currency that Doppler had stolen. He had stashed it somewhere, where it had been waiting when he broke jail after serving a year of a life rap.

That was the answer!

Hatch turned into Serrano, with a screeching of rubber. He was out of the car before it stopped, racing toward the porch of Ruth Duquesne's cottage. It was still dark.

His shoulder struck the door, and he went into that room like a catapult. His gun was in his hand. He heard the crash of a shot, and felt hot lead fan his cheek.

Moonlight slanted in through the open door. It showed a bare patch of carpet. That was all.

But now Hatch knew the lay-out of this room. He climbed over the sofa like a cat,

thrusting it out from the wall, dropping behind it as a bullet thunked into the upholstery. His groping hand found a lamp standard. Gingerly he levered himself up, sought for the switch, and turned it.

Light filled the room.

Ruth Duquesne was lying motionless on the floor. Hovering over her was the killer, still wearing the grotesque mask and furry overall suit that had disguised him from the first. His gun spat at the moment Hatch's own did.

The bullet smashed into the G-man's arm, swung him half around. Hatch kept his pistol leveled. He fired again.

The killer's body jerked convulsively. His gun swung crazily, centered on Hatch, but only for a moment. Then it dropped from a limp hand as the masked figure crumpled.

Ruth was not hurt. Hatch had arrived in time. She bandaged his arm as they waited for a response to the agent's phone call to Headquarters. The girl was as white as paper, but her curiosity was stronger than feminine weakness.

"You gave me one clue when you said Janna went out with Carnevan in the escort service," Hatch said. "Carnevan was hooked up with Keenan, at the Window. That's why he was able to get her that job there. And he kept seeing her—and he talked. Remember that snow party a couple of nights ago? Carnevan must have been hopped up to the ears. So much that he not only told her about Keenan's dope racket, but about himself, too. Who he was, I mean."

"Who was he?" Ruth murmured, moistening her lips.

"Charlie Doppler." Hatch pointed to the true-crime magazine, open in the girl's lap. "Remember when Janna came home that night, acting tight and talking about how Carnevan had met Keenan in Des Moines a year and a half ago? That was the time the Feds caught Doppler—Carnevan. But they didn't get their hands on eighty grand he'd stolen. Now look. Six months after Dopp-

[*Turn page*]

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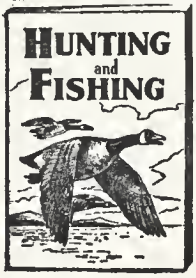

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ler's broken out of the pen, he's here in Los Angeles, with Keenan."

"You mean he gave Keenan the money before he—"

"I think we'll find out that's what happened," Hatch said. "Doppler had some hold over Keenan. Probably Keenan sank the dough in narcotics. Or maybe after Doppler collected, he decided to cut himself in on Keenan's racket. Only he talked too much to Janna, and he was kill-crazy. He was afraid she'd give him away to Lannigan. As for Keenan—well, Janna knew about the snow hidden in his office, of course, and he was trying to smooth down that end of the game."

Ruth nodded toward the dead man on the floor. "He isn't the same as the one in the picture," she said, touching the true-crime magazine with an unsteady finger.

Hatch had already removed Doppler's mask, revealing a tanned, hard face, with a pug nose and thin lips. Dark hair was blood-stained on the carpet.

"Charlie Doppler—Dyke Carnevan," Hatch said. "Compare the initials. They're reversed, but crooks have a habit of using their own initials when they take an alias. Besides, Janna left the explanation on that sheet of paper stuck in the magazine. She wrote, 'He's a masked murderer.' But the mask was Doppler's own face. Ever heard of plastic surgery?"

Ruth's eyes widened. Hatch nodded.

"Yeah. He got a surgeon to give him a new face, and came out here to hide out for a while. But he couldn't keep away from women. He didn't know anybody here, so he looked up an escort service—and Janna figured out the right angles. Only she didn't figure out all of them."

A police siren sounded outside. Hatch sighed and got up.

"I'd better let the boys in," he remarked. "They'll be wondering what this is all about!"

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 8)

Here's a bouquet from the West Coast:

Just a card to tell you I've just finished reading the THRILLING DETECTIVE October issue, and that I enjoyed MURDER COOPERATION about as much as anything I can remember. It had all the tight-knit drama and suspense that make a story more than entertaining. It was also humorous in just the right way. I rate AN EYE FOR AN EYE next best after that. And MOUNTAIN SHOWDOWN third. Give us more like these in the future!—*Arnold Tuemler, Laguna Beach, Calif.*

Glad you liked the stories, and especially that you passed along the word to us. We'll pass the word right on to the boys who wrote them—and will they glow! And by the way, Mr. Tuemler, you voted your preferences in exactly the same order as a young lady from Hammonton, N. J., who signs herself "Magazine Bug."

And now here, in part, is a letter from the Midwest:

NEGATIVES OF GUILT in the November issue had me on the edge of my easy chair until the end. "Mad and merry" is a mild way indeed to describe these Johnny Wells stories. I liked A MATTER OF DEATH by Fredric Brown too, but I have a slight "beef" about one point. At the end, the hero solves the case by disclosing he had made a search of a certain hotel room. Although I admit he had the time to make such a search, yet nothing was said earlier in the story to indicate it. I don't think that's playing fair!—*Charles Goodstock, Zanesville, O.*

Oops, sorry, if we didn't cover that point. It just goes to show how tricky it is to make detecting holeproof. But we're glad our

[*Turn page*]

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hero did have time to make the hotel search, even if the exact time of it wasn't indicated. Every knock points the way to improvement, and thank you, Charles Goodstock. But just try and trip us up again!

Lying in my bunk at night, and reading your magazines does a lot to relieve nervous tension and make me forget the dangerous waters we're passing through. I like THRILLING DETECTIVE, as do my mates, and dog-eared copies of it get passed around until they really fall apart. I won't comment on any particular stories because the magazines are often pretty old when we manage to get them. A vote of thanks from the Merchant Marine!—*J. L. S.*

And a vote of thanks right back at you, J.L.S. We aim to keep right on pleasing you. And you other fans—drop us a brief card or letter! We certainly welcome you behind the green lights here at HEADQUARTERS. Of course, we can't print all the letters we receive—and must content ourselves with quoting from just a few—but believe us, every one is mighty welcome and they're all carefully read and studied. Please address all communications to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. We'll be happy to hear from you.

Good luck! See you next issue.

—THE EDITOR

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THE MAN WHO TOOK A WALK

(Concluded from page 72)

cracked under pressure and perhaps a none-too-gentle kind of questioning. His accusation of his mother and brother may be explained as a tortured desire for relief, an attempt to direct the pressure away from himself. But the prompt confession of Joan and Richard Perry is more like mass hypnotism, the kind of suggestion whereby an Indian fakir makes a crowd see a boy atop an erect rope when there is no boy or rope there at all.

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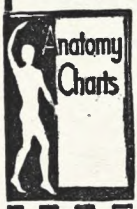

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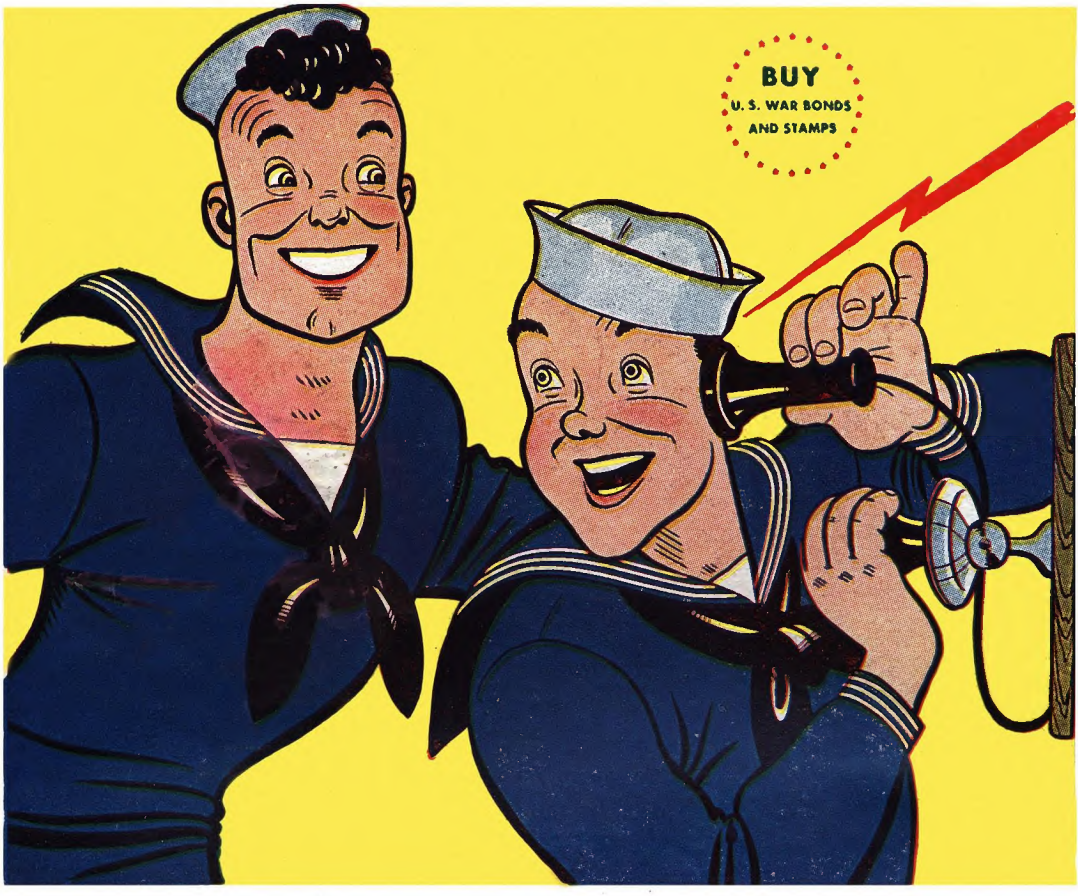

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